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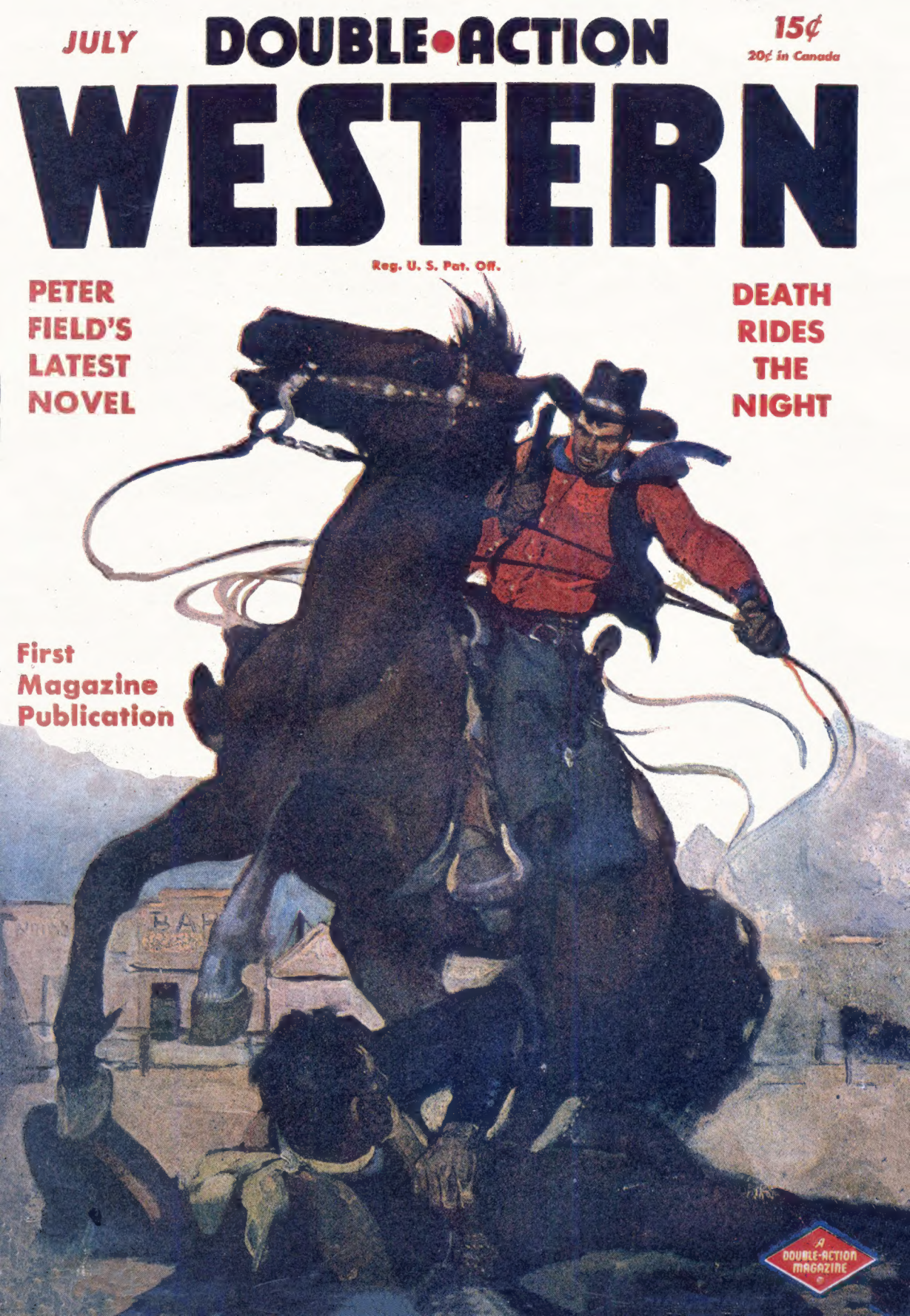

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DOUBLE-ACTION WESTERN

TITLE REGISTERED U. S. PATENT OFFICE

Volume 13 **July, 1946** **Number 1**

COMPLETE "POWDER VALLEY" NOVEL

(First Magazine Publication)

DEATH RIDES THE NIGHT.....By Peter Field 10

Was it possible that One-Eyed Ezra's mind had snapped and he'd become a homicidal maniac? What other explanation could there be for the brutal slaying of four, widely disparate persons in one night?

NOVELET

SONS OF GUNMEN.....By Cliff Campbell 85

A gunswift reputation may be a good thing at times — but there's other times when it can raise hell with a man who wants to live peacefully.

SHORT STORIES

SALT OF THE EARTH.....By Archie Joscelyn 72

As Ma Jackson says: the crookeder a man is, the easier he is to swindle when you play the cards right!

SCOURGE OF SALT CITY.....By Ray Hayton 82

The saddle-tramps had a bank-bustin' scheme that was slicker than slobbers!

Robert W. Lowndes, Editor

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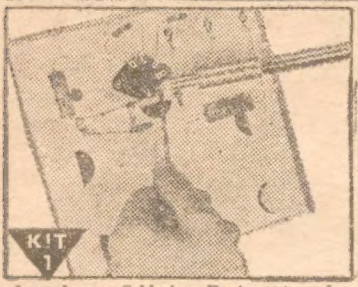

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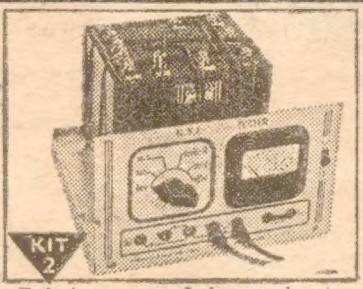

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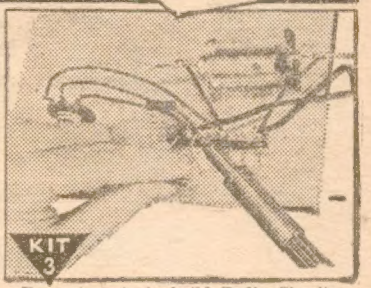

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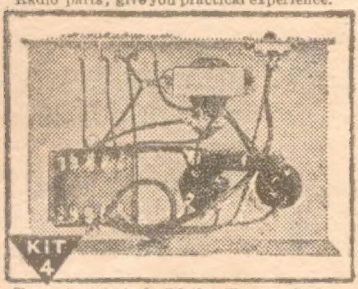

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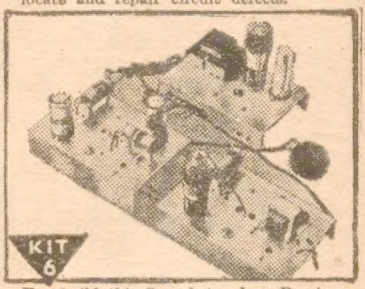

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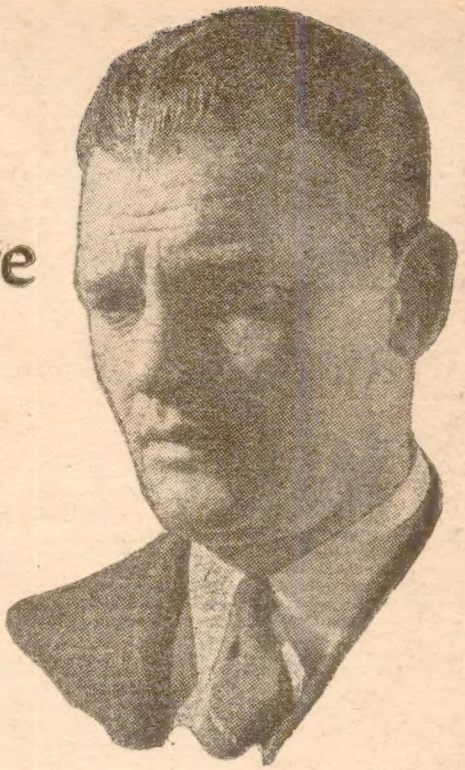

JUST what is the matter—why aren't you making more money? Look around you. Probably many of the people you know are doing a lot better than you are.

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DON'T MURDER YOUR SKIN!

Squeezing your skin to force out your pimples or blackheads may be injurious; leaving your skin with unsightly, embarrassing blemishes. Now, there is an easy, safe, harmless way that helps you rid your face of ugly, offensive, externally-caused skin troubles. *You merely follow a doctor's simple directions.*

You, or almost any man, can easily have a natural, healthy, normal complexion, free from externally-caused skin troubles, by just giving your skin the special care that handsome screen stars give theirs. It's really very simple—as easy as washing your face. The whole secret is in washing your face in a way that thoroughly cleanses the pores of your skin of every last speck of dirt and grime that often get deep into the pores and may frequently cause you skin troubles. Ordinary washing with ordinary soaps may not do this. You should use a highly-concentrated soap like VIDERM SKIN CLEANSER that penetrates the pores and acts as an antiseptic. When followed by a quick application of VIDERM MEDICATED SKIN CREAM, specks of irritating dirt and grime are quickly washed out, dissolve and disappear, leaving your skin clean, clear and free from things that often cause pimples, blackheads, and other externally-caused skin troubles.

It doesn't pay to risk marred skin, blotches, blemishes. Your very success in business, love and social life may depend upon your looks. *Handsomeness and a good appearance usually start with the condition of your skin.* Nobody likes a skin that looks unhealthy, unclean, abused, and marked with blackheads or pimples. WOMEN ARE ATTRACTED TO MEN WHO HAVE SMOOTH, CLEAR, ROBUST-LOOKING SKIN. Business executives don't choose men who have a poor-looking complexion. Don't take chances with your success in life when this inexpensive VIDERM formula may help you. *Don't murder your skin!* Here's all you have to do to keep smooth, clear skin. Use VIDERM SKIN CLEANSER when you wash your face. Rub the rich lather of this highly-concentrated soap on your face for just a few seconds and then rinse it off. Apply a little VIDERM MEDICATED SKIN CREAM and that's all there is to it. VIDERM MEDICATED SKIN CREAM quickly disappears, leaving your skin nice and smooth. This simple treatment used after shaving helps heal tiny nicks and cuts, relieves razor-burn and smarting besides conditioning your skin.

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Women don't like a messy-looking skin. Success in Romance, Business and Socially comes easier if you have a clear, smooth skin. It helps you every minute to more pleasure and success.

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A POWDER VALLEY NOVEL

"Ezra, wait!" gasped the old man.

First Magazine Publication of This Complete Book-Length Novel

Death Rides the Night

By PETER FIELD

One-Eyed Ezra looked ugly, but his friends, Pat Stevens and Sam Sloan knew him to be a decent hombre, who would never harm anyone without just provocation. Yet — it seemed as if Ezra had run amok!

CHAPTER I

SOMETHING was worrying big, one-eyed Ezra. This was quite evident to Pat and Sally Stevens as the evening meal progressed. Pat had butchered a fat two-year-old steer that afternoon, and Sally had

a huge pot of son-of-a-gun, a stew consisting of the heart, liver, kidneys, sweetbreads and marrow gut. It was one of Ezra's favorite dishes.

But tonight he didn't seem to realize that he was eating his favorite dish. Sally had dished up deep bowls for each of the men at the table before calling them to supper. There were three cowhands besides Ezra at the Lazy Mare ranch who ate at the table with Pat and Sally Stevens and their son, Dock. The way the three hands and Dock dug into their bowls of stew convinced Sally that it tasted all right, but Ezra was just dallying with his.

This was convincing proof he was mighty badly worried, because Ezra wasn't the sort to let any little worries keep him from enjoying his food. He had a huge body with the strength of a bull in his vast shoulders and he generally ate enough for three ordinary men. Sally had big, flaky biscuits to go with the stew, and a platter of fried potatoes. When Ezra took only one spoonful of potatoes and then began searching around in his bowl for pieces of heart instead of sopping his biscuit in it and gulping it up wholesale, Sally knew something was radically wrong with him.

She glanced at Pat who sat at the head of the table, and saw that Pat was also regarding Ezra with some concern. She lifted her eyebrows when Pat turned in her direction and he shook his head soberly to indicate he didn't know what was the matter.

"Isn't it all right, Ezra?" Sally asked anxiously across the table. "I put in two cloves of garlic particularly, because I thought you liked it that way."

Ezra looked at her with his one eye and said, "What, Ma'm?"

"Didn't you hear me?" Sally asked.

He said, "I was thinkin', Ma'm."

"When Ezra has a thought in his mind there isn't room for anything else," Pat said with a grin. "You know that, Sally. Let him eat his supper."

"Shore is good son-of-a-gun," Ezra muttered. He bent his red head to search in his bowl for another tidbit of heart and munched on it delicately.

Sally turned a worried gaze on her husband. She asked in a low, shocked voice, "Do you suppose he's in love, Pat?"

PAT shook his head to indicate this wasn't the time to badger the big man. He and Ezra had been so close that they generally understood each other's thoughts without spoken words. There had been three of them years before when Sam Sloan made up the trio.

First Pat had married Sally and settled here on the Lazy Mare ranch in Powder Valley, and Sam and Ezra had settled on a ranch of their own in the lower part of the valley. This was an ideal arrangement for a time, but both men were restless, and it wasn't long before they sold off the ranch and went off on an adventure of their own to Corpse's Corner, from which Pat had eventually had to extricate them.

Returning to Powder Valley after that episode, Sam Sloan fell hopelessly in love with pretty Kitty Lane; after they were married Sam settled down to ride a leg of the new Pony Express route into Dutch Springs, and Ezra had finally gravitated to the Lazy Mare ranch to act as foreman for Pat whose duties as sheriff prevented him from overseeing the ranch closely.

But Pat had known all along that Ezra wasn't happy in this arrangement, and he had been trying to help the big one-eyed man acquire a ranch of his own so he wouldn't have to live with either of his married friends. For Pat knew that the marriage of himself and of Sam Sloan was basically at the bottom of Ezra's unease. It wasn't so much that Ezra actually hungered for a wife and home of his own; Ezra had given up such hopes long ago. With his ugly scarred face and his single eye, he knew that no woman could ever love him; but just the same it wasn't easy for him to be around either Pat or Sam and see the happiness which an accident of nature had denied to him.

Pat understood this feeling of Ezra's without it being put into words;

just lately they had found a suitable place for sale, and a month previously Ezra had bought it with the aid of a loan from Pat.

At the time, Pat had thought the problem of Ezra's unhappiness was solved.

For a month he had been like his old self.

Pat Stevens scraped the bottom of his own bowl loudly, and when Sally jumped up to take it to the kitchen for a refill, he rubbed his bulging stomach and told her, "Only about half-full, honey, an' then I'll finish up with biscuits an' jelly."

WHEN she went to the kitchen, he asked Ezra casually, "Everything goin' all right out at the ranch?"

"You bet." Ezra took a sip of coffee and set his cup down. "I'll be gettin' outta yore way an' movin' in next week, I reckon."

"You know you're not in our way," Pat told him sharply. "It's been mighty fine havin' you here to keep things going right."

Ezra was staring fixedly at the red and white checked tablecloth. With a huge forefinger he traced a line around one of the red squares. He said, "I run into Eustis Harlow in Dutch Springs today."

Pat chuckled softly. "Is Harlow still sore because you got the jump on him and snapped up the Spangler ranch before he had a chance to overbid you?"

"He hasn't any right to be angry about that," said Sally briskly as she brought Pat's bowl back from the kitchen. "Just because he's got all the money in the world isn't any reason why he should want to own *all* of Powder Valley. How about you, Dock?" she went on, "ready for more stew?"

Dock said, "I reckon not, Mom." He looked up with a frown on his young face. "Can I go to the meetin' with you tonight, Dad?"

Pat dipped into his fresh bowl of stew and asked, "What meeting?"

"Naw," said Ezra loudly. "I don't reckon Mr. Harlow carries a mad very long. He bought me a drink in town today an' offered me the loan of some of his boys if I needed he'p gettin' things started."

"I think that was right nice of him," said Sally approvingly as she reseated herself. "I guess it isn't his fault he's as rich as Croesus and don't know what to do with his money except buy up ranches."

"Who's Croesus, Mom?" Dock asked curiously.

"He was an old king who had all the money in the world."

"Gee whiz, I never heard tell of him."

"Don't forget your mother used to be a school teacher," Pat chuckled. "What meeting were you talking about, Son?"

"I shore wouldn't trust him too fur, though," Ezra put in darkly. "Had a couple of men with him today that looked like Texas gun-hands tuh me. Ain't no need fer him tuh be hirin' strange hands when they's cowpokes here in thuh Valley lookin' fer jobs."

Pat turned back to Ezra with a frown. "Meaning Eustis Harlow?"

"Shore. That's who we wuz talkin' about, weren't it?"

"Along with history-kings and meetings I don't know anything about," Pat conceded dryly. "So Harlow's bringin' in gun-hands from down Texas-way, is he?"

"Shore-nuff looks thataway. Folks say he's got so many han's hired now they ride herd on each other, lackin' cattle tuh ride herd on." Ezra laughed loudly at his own joke and pushed his bowl back from him less than half-emptied. He rubbed the back of a huge hand across his red-whiskered face and pushed back his chair to get up.

"Goodness," said Sally sharply. "Aren't you even going to eat your dessert, Ezra? I opened a gallon can of peaches today and made a deep pie."

"I reckon I jest ain't got no appetite tuhnight," Ezra r u m b l e d, avoiding her troubled gaze. "Thought I might saddle up an' ride into town, see what's goin' on."

"Are *you* going to the meeting, Ezra?" Dock called out excitedly.

"Maybe mom'll let me ride in with you."

Ezra said, "I dunno what yo're talkin' about," and stalked out.

PAT stared after him and shook his head dubiously. "He's mighty upset about something." He turned to the three cowhands still at the table. "You boys know anything that's gone sour with Ezra?"

They all shook their heads and muttered that they didn't know. They hurried, self-consciously finishing up their dessert, and pushed back their chairs to leave as though to avoid any further questioning.

"Can I, Mom?" Dock asked.

"Can you what, Son?"

"Ride in to the meetin' with Ezra?"

"What meeting is he talking about, Pat?"

"I don't know. How about you, Pete?" Pat called out to the last of the departing cowboys. "Do you know anything about a meeting in town tonight?"

Pete was on his way through the door. He paused long enough to shake his head and mutter some sort of denial, then went on out toward the bunkhouse.

Sally looked at Pat in consternation with her pretty blond head tilted sideways while a spot of color glowed in each cheek. "What's gotten into all of them tonight, Pat? They all act as though they're afraid to talk to you."

"Or ashamed," Pat said harshly.

"And Ezra! When he doesn't want to eat peach pie there must be something terribly wrong with him. Why, you might think we had scarlet fever or something."

Pat's lean bronzed face was set in lines of harsh questioning. He shook his head and said, "I don't know, Sally. Looks to me like something's up." He frowned down the table toward Dock. "This meeting you're talking about, Son. Where did you hear about it?"

"Gee, I dunno. Some of the fellers were talkin'."

"What sort of meeting is it?"

"Whole county, I reckon. Gee, I thought ever'body was goin'."

"Tonight?"

"Yeh. Sure. I betcha Ezra an' Pete an' them are goin'. Can I ride in with 'em, Mom?"

Sally said, "Wait a minute, Dock." She tightened her lips and looked at her husband. "You're still the sheriff, aren't you?"

"Far's I know." Pat grinned, but without humor. "Not much sheriffin' to do lately."

"Isn't it queer you haven't been notified of the meeting?" Sally pursued. "They wouldn't have one without you, would they?"

Pat's face was grim. It frightened Sally suddenly. Most of the time she could forget those old gun-fighting days when that sort of look on Pat's face caused her heart to jump into her throat because she knew it meant he was ready to buckle on his guns and go out to meet death on even terms. He hadn't worn that look much during these later years, but it still had the power to bring Sally's heart up into her throat.

She leaned across the table and put her hand over his. "I'm sure everything's all right." But her tone betrayed her. It said, instead, that she knew everything decidedly *wasn't* all right. It changed to a pleading note, "Don't get upset, Pat. Someone must have forgotten to notify you."

Pat Stevens looked past her toward the open door. He didn't appear to feel her hand on his nor to notice the note of pleading in her voice. He said curtly, "I reckon I'll find out what it means." He got up and stalked out the front door. She sat very still at the table and listened to the hard crunch of his bootheels fade away to silence as he strode toward the corral.

"Gee whiz," Dock said in a low tone of awe. "Dad looked awful mad, didn't he, Mom? I'd sure hate to go up against him when he looked like that."

CHAPTER II

IT WAS still early enough in the spring for the night air to be cool. In this portion of southern Colorado, east of the Rockies, the

altitude of Powder Valley was high enough so that a tinge of winter cold carried on well into early summer, and the air was so thin and sweet that a man dragged great quantities of it deep into his lungs and it tasted like no other air on earth.

There was no other place on earth like Powder Valley.

That's why Pat Stevens was so disturbed as he went down toward the saddle shed and corrals to catch Ezra before he rode off to town. In Ezra's peculiar actions at the supper table, Pat sensed a threat to the peace and tranquillity of the Valley and those who loved it. He had an uneasy feeling that Mr. Eustis Harlow was somehow behind that threat.

It was something he couldn't put his finger on, and he didn't want to believe it, but the conclusion was unavoidable. He knew, now, it was something he had feared ever since Harlow had moved into the Valley from Texas six months previously. He had tried to feel differently, but from the beginning he had sensed a subtle antagonism toward the wealthy Texan who had come to the Valley with the announced intention of setting up one of the biggest and finest spreads between Montana and the Pecos River.

Harlow started by purchasing the VX ranch along the southern slope of the Valley for a good price, though he made it quite clear from the beginning that he planned to vastly extend the original boundaries of the VX before he was through. He was perfectly frank about his intentions. He had a great deal of money and was willing to pay for adjoining territory. He had only contempt for the small holdings of the ranchers in Powder Valley who were content to go along year after year with a comfortable living. He had grandiose ideas of establishing a huge cattle empire in southern Colorado which would eventually wallow up all the modest holdings in the Valley.

Well, Pat Stevens didn't blame the man for being ambitious. Eustis Harlow was quite open and honest about it. He didn't try to acquire land covertly nor by underhanded means. He laid his cash on the line in the open market and was able to overbid anyone who was presumptuous enough to bid against him.

HE WAS also very free with his money in the matter of making loans, and therein Pat Stevens and a few of the more intelligent ranchers saw Harlow's real danger toward the Valley. He talked loudly of improved methods and a better breed of beef stock, and he was quite willing to loan any of the ranchers money to make such improvements, taking a mortgage on their ranches, of course, as security for the loans.

With such money offered so freely, many of the ranchers had borrowed from him to buy fripperies and things they didn't really need, planning vaguely to repay the money from increased receipts; Pat feared they wouldn't be able to meet their obligtions when they came due. He felt that Harlow hoped it would work out that way, that it was the essence of his plan to eventually obtain control of the entire Valley, but you couldn't openly accuse the man of that. There wasn't anything dishonest about it. If people wanted to be fools and borrow more than they could pay back, you couldn't blame the lender for being businesslike and foreclosing on the mortgages to protect his investment.

Actually, nothing like this had happened yet. Eustis Harlow had been established in the Valley only six months, and he was well liked by most of his neighbors. But since his coming there had been a gradual spread of dissatisfaction among the small ranchers. Up to the time of his coming they had been well pleased with things as they were. They hadn't, in short, known they were missing anything. They were content to go along with their small holds and the moderate prosperity they had known for years. He had opened their eyes to undreamed of possibilities and joggled their suppressed ambitions. Each man began to dream of getting hold of more land and expanding, and they began to look contemptuously at the few like Pat Stev-

ens who refused to borrow money from Harlow and were content to go along as they had for many years.

These were the thoughts that raced through Pat's mind as he went toward the corrals. He wasn't really conscious of them. He knew only a deep fear that the security of his beloved Valley was somehow threatened, and he couldn't rid himself of the feeling that Mr. Eustis Harlow was at the bottom of it.

HE HAD sort of looked for an explosion last month when he helped Ezra get hold of the Spangler ranch, a twenty-section spread lying directly east of Harlow's present holdings. He knew that Harlow coveted those twenty sections, and when Ezra bought the ranch out from under the Texan's nose for less than Harlow would have paid, Pat expected him to be angry about it.

But Harlow wasn't the sort to cry over spilt milk. He laughingly told Pat so one day soon after the deal was finished when they happened to meet in the main street of Dutch Springs. He laughed boomingly and shook his head at the sheriff, and said, "I hear you and Ezra put one over on me in buying the Spangler ranch."

"How come?" asked Pat. "Spangler wanted to sell out an' Ezra met his price."

"With the help of a slight loan from you, eh Stevens?"

Pat shrugged. "Ezra an' me have been friends a long time, Harlow."

"You put over a smart deal," the Texan acknowledged. "Tell Ezra any time he gets a notion to sell out he can make a nice profit by coming to me."

Pat said he would tell Ezra. Well, that's all that had been said. Reviewing the incident later, Pat didn't know exactly why Harlow's attitude in the matter irritated him. He tried to be honest about it. He had to admit his irritation probably came from the fact that Harlow had been so damned decent about being outslickered. He would have liked it better if Harlow had been angry and threatened him. He was just too smooth, Pat decided. He had a way of disarming you and not leaving you anything to strike back at.

Ezra was leading a big-boned blazed-face sorrel out of the corral to the saddle shed when Pat got there. He led the sorrel past Pat and said, "Hi," without turning his one eye in Pat's direction. He took a bridle down from a nail and busied himself fitting the curb bit in the horse's mouth, just as though he didn't know Pat had come down to have a talk with him.

Pat lit a cigarette and spun the match away into the velvety darkness. "Ridin' in to town, huh?"

"Yep. Thought I would."

"The other boys going?"

"I dunno." Ezra threw a saddle blanket over the sorrel's back.

Pat took a deep drag on his cigarette. He asked, "What's it all about, Ezra?"

"All what?"

"The meeting in town. The one you're goin' to."

"Who said I wuz goin' to a meetin'?"

"Come on off it," Pat said half angrily. "Something's eatin' on you, Ezra. What is it?"

Ezra tossed a heavy saddle over the sorrel. He ducked his head to reach under the animal's belly and get hold of the center-fire girth swinging on the other side. He pushed the end of the latigo strap through the iron loop and pulled the girth tight. "You listenin' to what Dock says?" he scoffed at last.

Pat sighed. "You never could keep a secret from me, Ezra. Right now it's fightin' to come out. It'll turn sour in yore belly if you don't tell me 'fore you ride off."

Ezra buckled the latigo strap carefully. "What'd you say if I tole you you'd mebbe be better off not askin' so damn many questions?" He tried to sound angry at Pat, but managed only to sound mournful.

"I'd say I'm ridin' in with you to get my own answer. Wait a minute till I throw a saddle on the gray." Pat turned toward the corral, picking a short coiled catchrope off a hook on the wall.

"Wait a minute," Ezra growled gruffly.

Pat stopped and waited.

"Cain't you take my word fer it there ain't no cause tuh git riled up?"

Pat said, "Not when you don't hardly taste yore son-of-a-gun an' don't wait for a piece of peach pie."

Ezra sighed loudly and mournfully. "I was scairt you wouldn't. Aw right, there *is* a meetin' tuhnight, Pat. In the main room of the courthouse."

Pat remained silent. He waited for Ezra to go on.

"I reckoned I'd sorta ride in tuh see what happened," Ezra went on weakly.

"Who passed out the invites to the meetin'?"

"Well now, that's a funny thing. Seems like no one don't rightly know. There's bin word passed around there'd be free beer, an' they do say Eustis Harlow is footin' the bill."

PAT stiffened as he heard that name. He wasn't surprised though. He'd known all long it had something to do with Harlow. He asked quietly, "What's the purpose of the meeting, Ezra?"

"That's . . . what I didn't wanta tell you."

"I figgered that," Pat said angrily. "What is it?"

"I've heered some talk about mebbe it was time we wuz 'lectin' a new sheriff here in thuh Valley," Ezra admitted unhappily. "I don't *know* fer shore that's what the meetin's about tuhnight, but it'd be my guess it is. That's why I reckoned you wouldn't wanta come."

"Why not?" Pat's voice was bleak. "Looks to me like I'm sort of a int'rested party."

"Don't do it, Pat," Ezra begged him. "Me an' Sam Sloan an' some of the other boys figger on settin' in. We'll see you git a square deal."

Pat shrugged his shoulders slowly. He turned away without another word and started back to the ranch house. Ezra stared after him, shaking his shaggy red head worriedly. Danged if you could tell about Pat Stevens. Now, Ezra would have thought Pat would be mad as a wet hen when he learned how some of his neighbors were meeting to vote on taking the sheriff's badge away from him. That's why Ezra didn't want him to go. He was afraid Pat might kick up a rumpus and there'd be shooting. Instead of that, Pat was walking off with his tail between his legs. It shore was hard to figger him out.

Ezra sighed and swung into the saddle. He rode to the bunkhouse and called out gruffly, "You yahoos ready tuh ride?"

Pete came to the door. "We got our hawses saddled an' tied down to the fence. Didn't want thuh boss to ketch us ridin' off."

"He won't ketch you," Ezra grunted. "Hit thuh saddle an' le's ride. Pat'll need all thuh friends he's got in town tuhnight."

Sally was clearing up the supper dishes when Pat walked back in the front door. She whirled to look at him with startled eyes, then smiled when she saw the quiet look that had driven the grimness from his face. "Everything's all right," she guessed happily. "Oh, Pat, I was so afraid when you went out looking like that."

"What were you afraid of?"

"I don't know," she confessed miserably. "After the way Ezra acted. What *is* it about a meeting?"

"Nothin' much. Some of the boys gettin' together to sop up some beer. Know where my badge is, Sally?"

"Are you ridin' in to town, Dad?" Dock stuck his head in through an inner doorway. "Can I go with you?"

"No, Dock," Sally said firmly. "A bunch of men will be drinking beer. I don't know about your badge, Pat. You're *supposed* to wear it all the time, you know," she added in mild reproof.

Pat said gently, "I reckon I better take it in with me tonight."

"I'll look in the bedroom and see if I can find it." Sally turned away. She hesitated and asked in a different tone, "Do you think there'll be trouble?"

Pat said, "Why no, Sally. I don't reckon so."

Sally came back with the gleaming symbol of lawdom in her outstretched

palm, and Pat looked at it queerly as he took it from her.

It meant a lot to Sally. Women were sort of funny about things like that. Now him, he'd be glad to be rid of it. He had never felt quite right being a lawman. Seemed like he was sort of setting himself up to be better than his fellow men, and he didn't feel like that at all.

He put his arm about her shoulders and tightened it there. He promised, "I won't be late."

"I'm glad you're not wearing your gun," she breathed. "I never worry until I see you buckle them on, Pat."

He tipped her face up and kissed the lips that had grown sweeter to him as the years went by, then turned away and went down to the corral to rope out his gray saddle horse.

CHAPTER III

THE hitching rail in front of the new Powder Valley courthouse was lined with saddled horses. Down the street the rail in front of the Gold Eagle Saloon was similarly lined. A lot of the riders had drifted in out of curiosity, and others were drawn to the meeting by the rumors of free beer in the courthouse yard. Others, who were indebted to Eustis Harlow in one way or another had received instructions practically amounting to orders for them to be present with all their hands.

No one seemed to know exactly why the meeting had been called, nor what it was about. There were all sorts of rumors going the rounds. The most persistent of these was that Pat Stevens had decided to resign as sheriff and the meeting had been called to select his successor.

At this stage in its development, Powder Valley had a rather peculiar system of self-government based on expediency rather than on a strict interpretation of state laws. There were no actual defined boundaries of the county, nor were there any duly elected county official. Powder Valley was an isolated community separated from its neighbors by mountains on all sides, and for years past it had been customary to settle any differences of opinion among its inhabitants by a meeting such as had been called for tonight. With no complex questions of law to vex them, a majority vote was all that was required to make a decision, and the minority always swung into line with the rest when they found they were defeated. It was actually a practical demonstration of pure democracy in action, and the people of the Valley had lived together peaceably a good many years with no real cleavage of opinion.

The crowd around the two barrels of beer set up in front of the courthouse was orderly and good-natured. Most of the men had known most of the others for years and they made the meeting into a sort of social occasion for exchanging news about their families and information about the condition of pasturage and the new calf crop.

Eustis Harlow was very much in evidence among the group around the beer barrels. He was a big man with a hearty voice and a genial manner. He wore a big white Stetson and a red silk shirt with a leather vest decorated with heavy conchos of Mexican gold. He had a wide hand-carved belt with a big gold buckle in front, and the bottoms of his pants were tucked into small hand-made boots with figures formed on them by ornamental white stitching. His big-roweled spurs had little copper bells on them that tinkled as he moved, and a big, square-cut diamond glistened from a ring on his hand.

Yet all this display in contrast to the shabby work-clothing of the other ranchers didn't make Eustis Harlow seem affected or overdresed. He was a man who could wear that sort of thing and get away with it. He looked like a man who had fought hard and worked hard to reach his present position at the top, and like one who intended to stay there.

THERE were some who didn't like Harlow, and a few who feared him, but mostly the citizens of Powder Valley felt they were lucky that such a man had sold out his huge holdings in Texas and come

to Colorado to re-establish himself. As they said approvingly to one another while they waited for the meeting to open, he was the kind of man who made things hum when he was around. He didn't sit back and let any grass grow under his feet, by golly. Even those who owed him money and didn't know how they would pay off their mortgages thought it had been a good thing for the Valley when Harlow decided to settle there.

When they began drifting into the courthouse to take seats on the long wooden benches in the big meeting room, Harlow was at the door with a handshake and a brief word for each one who entered.

Somehow, he managed to give the impression that he was the host and that it was *his* courthouse, *his* meeting. All of them knew they had been drinking his beer, of course, so it wasn't difficult to go a step further and accept his leadership in Valley affairs.

Even the old-timers like John Boyd and Mr. Winters who resented Eustis Harlow and felt he was a menace to their Valley found it impossible to put their finger on anything Harlow said or did to put him in the wrong. There wasn't any reason why he shouldn't stand at the door and shake hands with them as they went in if he wanted to. It was all open and aboveboard. But it put them at a disadvantage, and they felt it and Harlow knew they felt it. The only thing you could do if you didn't like it was to stay away from the meeting, and that would be playing right into Harlow's hands.

When the last booted and sweaty rancher was inside, Eustis Harlow left his place at the door and went up to the long pine table in front of the room. He stood negligently with his fingertips touching the table, and he addressed them bluntly:

"I'm not an orator and I don't aim to do any orating tonight. I called this meeting to find out what we're going to do about a new sheriff in Powder Valley."

Mr. Winters was sitting in the front row. He ran the general store in Dutch Springs and was the postmaster, and for years he had sort of unofficially run things in Powder Valley. John Boyd, Pat's nearest neighbor, sat on Winters' right. He was a stringy, taciturn man who would have gone to hell and back for Pat Stevens. Ezra was on Winters' left, and beyond him was Sam Sloan. Sam was one of the few men in the room who had packed a gun to the meeting. As Pony Express rider, Sam always rode his route armed, and he didn't take his .45 off while he was in town because he would have felt undressed without it.

THE storekeeper got to his feet at once. He said mildly, "I reckon most of us didn't know we were going to do anything about getting a new sheriff. I hadn't heard about Pat Stevens turning in his badge yet."

There was a shuffling of feet and a murmur of agreement from the benches behind him.

"Perhaps he hasn't turned in his badge," Harlow assented. "I've been checking up and I don't believe we have to wait for Stevens to resign. The way I see it, he was put in office by a majority vote and I guess he can be put out the same way. By a majority of us that are here tonight."

Winters had remained standing. "Why, I guess that's right," he agreed. His voice was incredulous. "Do you reckon we're going to vote Pat Stevens out of office? After all he's done for the Valley?"

"That's exactly what I hope you're going to do. I know you're all friends of Stevens'. I like him myself. He's a fine man and I don't deny he's done some mighty fine things in the past. But that's in the *past*. We can't afford to keep a sheriff on his past reputation. We need one that will do things *now*."

John Boyd got up angrily. "Are you hintin' that Pat ain't makin' us a good sheriff?"

"I'm not hinting at anything," Eustis Harlow told him equably. "I'm saying it right out loud in meeting." He showed his white teeth in a

wide smile. "I'm not the kind of man that makes hints. I believe in coming straight out and saying my piece." He thudded his right fist into the palm of his left hand for emphasis. "I'm losing cattle off my ranch every day. Expensive, blooded stock. Sheriff Stevens hasn't done a single thing to stop the rustling though I've appealed to him time and again. I can't stay here and go on with my plans to build this up into a real cow-country if that sort of things goes on."

"It was purty good cow-country before you stuck yore nose in here," Boyd told him angrily. Harlow smiled tolerantly at the old cowman. "You mean you were satisfied. You and the rest of you. But do you think I got where I am today by being satisfied?"

"Where are you right now?" Sam Sloan spoke up caustically.

Harlow told him evenly, "I'm not riding a Pony Express route to earn my living." He turned his attention away from the men on the front bench as Sam's face darkened angrily. He lifted his voice and went on, "If we're to have any real progress in this valley we've got to wake up and organize things on an orderly basis. In the first place, I understand that Pat Stevens doesn't even draw a salary as sheriff. No wonder he hasn't the time nor inclination to run down the rustlers stealing my stock. We've got to put a man in the sheriff's office who'll devote his full time to the job of maintaining order in Powder Valley. I'm here to make a fair offer. Out of my own pocket I'll pay half of the salary of a new sheriff."

"Makes a man wonder why you're so anxious to get Pat out of office," Winters said. "When a man spends money he's generally got a good reason."

"You're right," Harlow told him. "I'll save money by getting an energetic sheriff on the job. Maybe some of you have wondered about the new hands I've been hiring lately. I intend to protect my cattle from rustlers if I have to hire a private army of gunhands to do it. It'd be cheaper for me to pay the entire salary of a sheriff."

MOST of the men in the room glanced aside at the half dozen riders who had entered quietly after the others and stood slouched against the wall. All were armed with guns in open holsters worn low on the hip for a fast draw. They were a hard-bitten bunch. Their leader was a tall thin-faced man with a drooping sandy mustache.

"If yo're losin' cattle ye're the only man in the Valley that is," said John Boyd harshly. "Me, I kinda doubt it."

Harlow's features hardened. "Are you calling me a liar?"

Boyd shrugged and spit a stream of tobacco juice at a crack in the floor. "Got anybody to back up yore story?"

Harlow looked at the men along the wall. "How about it, Tex? You tell them about the rustlers."

"Oh him!" Boyd looked at the sandy-mustached gunman scornfully, "Shore he'd back up yore lie."

The gunman stepped away from the wall with his eyes fixed on the seamed face of the aged rancher His thumbs were hooked inside his gunbelts in front and he moved with a stealthy flowing stride like a snake crossing the floor In a gentle Texas drawl that held unmistakable menace, he asked, "Would you be meanin' me, Mistah?"

Ezra started to get up but Sam Sloan put a hand on the big man's shoulder and forced him back to the bench He got up instead, and his hand was openly on the butt of his gun. His dark face was distorted as he snarled, "Pick on me if yo're lookin' fer trouble."

Tex stopped and surveyed him unconcernedly, a grin twitching the thin lips beneath his mustache.

Before he could speak, Eustis Harlow said placatingly, "Let's not have this sort of thing, gentlemen. We can settle this without shooting. The only question before this meeting is whether we shall appoint someone to take Pat Stevens' place as sheriff of Powder Valley. Votes are much better than bullets."

"He's right," said a quiet voice from the back of the room. "Sit down an' cool off, Sam."

It was Pat Stevens. He sauntered

forward with lamplight gleaming from the silver star on his shirt.

Sam Sloan glared at Pat and then sat down. Tex surveyed the newcomer carefully, and then moved back to lean against the wall again.

Eustis Harlow's face hardened as Pat came toward him. He said bitterly, "I hoped you wouldn't hear about this meeting in time to attend. I figured it'd be easier on you that way."

"That," said Pat, "was right considerate of you, Mister Harlow. I shore appreciate you tryin' tuh spare my feelings." He nodded to Boyd and the storekeeper, said, "Howdy, John," and sauntered past them to stand beside Harlow at the table.

"We're decided," Harold told him loudly, "to make up a salary and appoint a full-time sheriff for Powder Valley. *I'm* paying half the salary out of my own pocket."

"IN THAT case," said Pat reasonably, "I reckon it's likely you'll want the namin' of the new sheriff." He reached up and unpinned the star from his shirt. "I won't be standin' in yore way none." He dropped the silver badge on the table in front of Harlow.

"Don't you do it, Pat." Winters was on his feet instantly, and from behind him came a low murmur of disapproval. But it was a low murmur and came from scattered throats throughout the crowded benches. There were probably thirty men in the room. Pat knew that more than half of them were in Harlow's debt in one way or another, and all those had all their hands with them. He had an idea how the voting would go if it was put to a test.

He shook his head at Winters and said, "You an' me ain't been free enough loanin' our money out. I reckon Harlow's got this game sewed up the way he wants it, an' I don't embarrass my neighbors by making 'em go on record votin' against me. I've done resigned the sheriffin' job, so you-all pin the star on anybody you want." He turned and strode down the hall and out the door.

Sam Sloan and Ezra followed him out angrily, and Boyd and Winters went after them. Other men got up and went out silently, until less than twenty remained. They sat on the benches silently, not looking at each other nor saying anything.

Harlow waited until the last man had gone, leaning against the table with a grim smile on his lips. When he was sure the defection was complete he said, "It looks as though we could get down to business now without having any more trouble. I suggest we pin this star on Tex and pay him fifty dollars a month. He's a stranger in the Valley and won't play favorites. And if he needs any deputies he can call them off my ranch any time he wants. Anybody got a better idea?"

Nobody offered a better idea. Eustis Harlow pinned the silver badge of office on the Texas gunhand and the ranchers shambled out awkwardly into the night.

CHAPTER IV

PAT STEVENS stood alone at the end of the bar in the Gold Eagle Saloon with an uncorked bottle of whisky and a half-full glass in front of him. He grinned wryly as Sam and Ezra hurried in, followed by John Boyd and Mr. Winters. He lifted his glass in mock salute and called to the bartender, "Set out four more glasses. These hombres will be drinkin' out of my bottle."

Sam Sloan stopped in front of him with his elbows angled out from hairy hands planted on his hips. "Hell of uh way fer a growed man tuh act," he growled disgustedly. "Turnin' in yore badge without a fight."

Pat lifted his glass and drank from it as though he hadn't a care in the world. "I reckon I'll get drunk," he murmured pensively. "Plumb, dead, skunk drunk. I can do it now I'm not sheriff no more." His gaze challenged the worried faces of his four friends. "You'll never know what a weight that there badge was to me," he sighed. "Stayin' sober an' setting an example for the rest of the town. Shore has cramped my style."

The bartender set out four more

glasses and filled them from the bottle of whisky. Each of the men took a glass and didn't say anything. They all knew Pat was talking through his hat. He had never been a drinking man.

Other men began drifting into the saloon. They were the friends of Pat's who had left the meeting immediately after he walked out. They glanced down at the group of five at the end of the bar but remained separated from them out of a feeling of delicacy, not wanting to intrude on the close friends at this moment.

Winters watched them coming in and muttered angrily, "Dang it all, I reckon there's nobody left at the meeting by this time except Harlow and his hands and them that are beholden to him for loans and such. They'll vote in anybody they want for sheriff now."

"They would have anyway," Pat argued. "Harlow had the most votes there if it came to a showdown."

"He wouldn't have," said Boyd angrily, "if ever'body had knowed about the meetin'. He jest passed the word around amongst the ones he wanted to come, an' not many of the rest of us heard about it in time."

Pat shrugged and said mildly, "That's what you might call smart politics. Important thing is, he had us outvoted. If I had't turned in my badge there'd been a showdown an' those that owe Harlow money would've voted against me. Lots of 'em are my friends an' wouldn't like to do it. Easier for 'em for *us* to get out and let them run it their own way."

"Why make it easy on them low-down coyotes?" snorted Sam. "I say you shoulda stood up fer yore rights an' made 'em be counted when the votin' came. That way we'd all know who was ag'in yuh an' who wasn't."

PAT shook his head slowly. "That wouldn't be so good." He was talking more to himself than to the others. "Can't blame them too much. Less hard feelin's the better." He paused and cleared his throat. "I got a feelin' we're facin' bad trouble here in Powder Valley. Worst trouble we've ever seen, maybe. The more we get split up into takin' sides, the harder it'll be gittin' back together after it's all over. That's why I didn't cause a rumpus tonight. We got to avoid a showdown if we can. . .till we get things squared around again."

"You mean until we get Eustis Harlow kicked out and back on an even keel," Mr. Winters said harshly.

"Why yes. I reckon that's sorta what I meant."

Mr. Winters reached for the bottle of whisky. "Meeting's adjourned to the back room," he announced. "We better get our heads together right now and see what's what." He led the way back through a rear door and the others followed him with their glasses in their hands.

The other men in the saloon watched them go into the back room hopefully. John Boyd and Winters and Pat Stevens had always been leaders in the community, with Sam and Ezra backing up any play that Pat decided upon. This conclave in the Gold Eagle was an indication to the others that Powder Valley wasn't going to take this thing lying down, and they were heartened by this knowledge.

The back room of the Gold Eagle had a round poker table reserved for the private use of a exclusive clientele when they wished to gamble undisturbed for high stakes. It was deserted tonight.

Mr. Winters set Pat's bottle of whisky on the table, then picked it up after a moment of indecision and poured himself a second drink. This action in itself was a tacit admission that the storekeeper was quite upset. He was an abstemious man and none of the others had ever known him to take two drinks in succession before.

They all pulled chairs up to the card table and sat down. Boyd emptied his second glass and poured himself a third. He stared at Pat and demanded, "What's this stuff Harlow pulled about his stock bein' rustled? Fust I've heard of any sech doin's in the Valley."

Pat looked surprised. "*What* about it?"

Winters and Boyd both spoke together, explaining the accusation the wealthy Texan had made against the

sheriff. "And he ended up," Winters said bitterly, "by saying as how you didn't draw no salary as sheriff and that's why he reckoned you hadn't done anything to stop his cattle being stole. That's when he offered to pay half a new sheriff's salary out of his own pocket."

Pat's face tightened. He tipped up his glass and emptied it, stared down into it reflectively. "First I ever heard of. . .wait a minute. Come to think of it, Harlow did stop me 'bout two months ago an' said he thought he was losin' some stock. I told him to check up an' let me know if it kept on. When he never said any more I reckoned he was mistaken or the stealing had stopped."

"An' he made it sound tuhnight like he was bein' stole pore an' you wouldn't do nothin' about it," Sam ejaculated. "That's a plumb lie an' I aim to make him eat them words tuhnight. . .without no seasonin' on 'em." He thumped his glass down and started to push his chair back.

Pat shook his head and said soberly, "Hold it, Sam. That's just what Harlow is itchin' for. Didn't you see those waddies lined up against the wall tonight?"

"Them?" Sam snorted, his seamed face dark with anger. "I ain't scairt of. . ."

"Don't be a damn fool," advised Pat unemotionally. "They're all killers, and that long-mustached one he calls not they'll end up by giving him my not they'll end up giving' him my badge so he'll be able to gun a man down legal. We'd be playing right into their hands by starting any gunplay."

"Wait a minute, Pat." Winters spoke carefully. "What is your opinion of Eustis Harlow?"

"I THINK he aims to end up ownin' Powder Valley." Pat answered quietly and without emotion. "He's playin' his cards careful. He's got the money an' now he's got his own sheriff. Next thing you know he'll be ownin' the bank, an' then *you'd* better look out. If I was him I'd be planning on putting my own store in here an' raising prices an' givin' a heap of credit. That'd put you out of business."

"He's already trying that," Winters said dryly. "He offered to buy me out lock, stock and barrel last month for half again what my store is really worth. When I told him it wasn't for sale, he just laughed and said maybe I'd be glad to sell for half his price in a few months."

Pat took another drink. His bronzed face was very grave.

"We're up against the worst danger Powder Valley has ever faced," he said flatly. "Worse'n Jud Biloff an' his irrigation scheme, an' worse even than Judge J. Worthington Prink an' his gang of cutthroats from Denver. Reason Harlow is worse, he's got all the money he needs, and he's plenty smart besides. He'll eat up the Valley ranch by ranch, and in the end we'll all be hired hands workin' for him."

"I'll be eternally damned if we will," John Boyd said angrily. "Not me. There's some of us got sense enough to stay out of debt to him."

"There's other ways of getting a man. You owe the bank, don't you?"

"Shore. I borrowed a little two years ago when we had the drought. But shucks, I pay good interest an' Rudd Fleming ain't goin' to press me long's I keep up the payments."

"That's right enough. *Rudd* won't," Pat conceded. "But supposin' Rudd didn't have the say no more an' Harlow was running the bank?"

"Not yet. Nor he's not runnin' a store in Dutch Springs yet an' underselling Winters. Give him time. He's playin' it slow and careful. Look how he's already spreadin' out from the VX ranch."

"One way he ain't gonna spread out is east," said Ezra suddenly, opening his mouth the first time since he had walked out of the meeting hall. "Not long as I'm a-settin' on the Spangler ranch."

"That's the first place he's been foiled since he got started," Pat agreed. "But he can swallow up the property on both sides an' put the squeeze on you. That's the sort of thing you've got to watch out for."

"First time I've heard you talk this way," Winters told Pat. "You're putting into words what I've had a sneak-

ing feeling about for a couple of months. I've been going along keeping my mouth shut hoping maybe I was wrong about him."

"I reckon that's about the way we've all felt," Pat agreed. "Way I see it, though, we can't go on along hoping much longer. Looks to me like he showed his fangs tonight."

"That's why you should of fought to keep on being sheriff," the storekeeper protested. "That meeting tonight wasn't really legal. We could of protested and got up a meeting of our own with more votes on our side. Shucks," he went on excitedly, "it still isn't too late for that. All we've got to do is call another meeting next week and vote his sheriff out and you back in. We'll do it, by golly. We'll set a date and I'll start passing the word along. . ."

"No you won't," said Pat sharply.

They all looked at him in surprise.

"Give him enough rope to hang hisself," Pat argued slowly. "With everything goin' his way he's bound to slip up. An' me, I'm sorta glad to get rid of that sheriff's badge. You'd be s'prised how heavy a little silver star can weight a man down."

THEY all continued to look at him in consternation, showing that none of them understood what he was trying to say.

"Me, I never was cut out for lawin'," Pat went on blandly. "*You* know that, Sam. You an' Ezra. Wearin' that badge cramped my style somethin' awful. There's lotsa things a man'd like to do that a sheriff can't do."

Sam's dark ugly face began to glow exuberantly. "You mean it'll be like old times again," he exulted. "When our guns was the only law we ever needed." He nodded happily. "That's the ticket."

"Not quite like old times," Pat reminded him sharply. "You've got Kitty an' a little one on the way. An' I've got Sally and Dock. Neither you nor me can risk hittin' the owl-hoot trail like we usta. We got to be a little smarter an' figure things out."

"Best way is tuh have it out with Harlow fair an' square," Sam muttered. "Weight him down with lead in his guts so he won't get around so good."

"He don't pack a shootin' iron," Pat reminded Sam. "Killin' Harlow would be murder, an' you wouldn't like iron bars separating you an' Kitty, not with the baby most due."

Ezra began to smile. It was a torturous and terrifying process. It brought the long jagged scar on his face out into bold relief and made him more hideously ugly than before. "I ain't worryin' about no woman an' there shore ain't no woman worryin' about me," he said flatly. "Looks like I'm the one tuh call his hand."

"Don't be gettin' foolish idees," Pat chided him. "You're hard to kill but you never were worth a hoot when it comes to gun-play. That Longhorned gunjasper would shoot you down before you got a play made. Nope." He shook his head decisively. "We got to play it smart too, an' take our time. I got a feelin' Mister Eustis Harlow is bound to overstretch hisself if we let him go." He broke off as a sharp rap sounded on the door and then it swung open.

Pete came in and closed the door behind him. The oldest and most trustworthy of the hands of the Lazy Mare, Pete had worked for Pat Stevens going on five years. He was a stocky, blond fellow of about thirty who always spoke in monosyllables and never wasted his breath in a nod or a shake of his head would do as well.

A lot of drinks had loosened Pete's tongue. He stood with his back against the closed door and blurted out:

"I reckoned you oughtta know they was lookin' for Ezra outside."

"Who's lookin' for him?" asked Pat sharply.

"New sheriff."

"Who's the new sheriff?" Pat went on patiently.

"Thin guy. From Texas. Reckon they call him Tripo."

"Him with the two guns an' the mustache," John Boyd put in.

"What does he want with Ezra?" Pat probed.

"Dunno. Heard some talk 'bout 'restin' him."

"What for?"

Pete shook his head. "Didn' say."

"Where's this Tripo now?"

"Out front with Harlow." Pete jerked his head toward the door through which he had entered.

THERE was silence in the back room. Pat reached for the whisky and put it to his mouth. It was purely reflex action while his mind took in the import of Pete's news.

Ezra sat very still with his big mouth hanging half open, a look of childlike consternation on his red-whiskered face. Boyd and Winters watched Pat to see how he would react.

Sam Sloan was the first one to speak. He stood up and his calloused right hand caressed the gun-butt at his hip. "I reckon mebby I'll take a hand," he murmured. "Anybody wants tuh 'rest Ezra. . ."

Pat set the bottle down with a loud thump. "No, Sam. That's the wrong play."

"Is it?" Sam's dark face was expressionless. "We're cooped up here with the only way out through the front. I'll go out fust an' see that nobody stops us."

Pat got up. He said in a harder voice, "You've got to think of Kitty, and your job."

Sam's upper lip curled away from his teeth contemptuously. "I'm the only one hereabouts packin' a gun," he pointed out as though that automatically settled everything.

"That's what they want," Pat reminded him angrily. "You'll get you an' Ezra both killed if you start somethin'. Then there'll be two less of us against Harlow."

"Mebby somebody else might git killed 'stead of us," Sam said in a gentle, terribly remote voice. "I ain't bin hitched up to Kitty long as you have to Sally, Pat, an' I reckon I ain't got plumb softened up yet. You comin' behind me, Ezra?"

"Shore thing." Ezra looked happy again. He heaved his huge body out of the chair and looked around for a weapon. He picked up the chair and studied it thoughtfully, then smashed it down on a corner of the table and wrenched a heavy leg loose.

"You two crazy galoots!" Pat kicked his chair back and leaped to his feet. "I won't let you do it. You're lettin' them choose the time an' place. You won't be any good to Powder Valley dead."

"I reckon it ain't you that's doin, the decidin'," said Sam Sloan coldly. "I've got six slugs that says. . ."

Pat took one long step forward and swung his right fist up from the floor at the same time. It cracked solidly against Sam Sloan's jaw and sent the smaller man to the floor. Ezra stared down at his fallen partner stupidly while Pat leaned over him and jerked the gun from Sam's holster.

"You shouldn't ort to've hit Sam," Ezra began in a troubled voice. "Dang it, Pat . . ."

Pat straightened up with Sam's gun in his hand. His gray eyes were bleak and he was breathing hard. He said, "Put down that chair leg, Ezra."

John Boyd started to interfere. He took a step forward. "What's got into you, Pat? What in tarnation . . . ?"

"I'm takin' Ezra out to the sheriff," said Pat thinly. "Put it down, Ezra, 'fore I shoot it out of your hand. You're goin' out quiet."

Ezra blinked his one eye and it looked for a moment as though it was misted over with tears. He said sadly, "I shore never thought. . ."

"To hell with what you ever thought," raged Pat. "Open that door, Pete."

Pete opened the door.

"Move on out." Pat gestured Ezra toward the door leading out into the saloon.

Ezra dropped his improvised weapon. He stood for a moment with his great arms swinging laxly by his side, then he hung his head and went out in front of Pat.

The saloon was full of men and of loud talk. The words died on men's lips as they turned and saw Ezra shambling toward them with a grim-faced Pat Stevens following him with Sam's gun in his hand.

The new sheriff and Eustis Harlow bustled back from the front of the saloon. Tripo had his hands on both guns and was smiling thinly. Harlow's florid face was a curious mask of indecision and hardly concealed anger. He demanded, "What's going on here, Stevens?"

"I heard your new sheriff wanted to

arrest Ezra. Here he is, soon as I hear the charge."

Men looked at each other and shook their heads in hopeless incomprehension. If the gun-partnership between Pat, Ezra and Sam was busting up, their glances said, things had sure come to a bad pass in Powder Valley.

Tripo looked at Harlow and shrugged. He drawled, "Thanks for yo' h'ep, Stevens. I'm locking Ezra up fo' rustlin'."

"Who made the charge?" Pat asked.

"I did," Harlow said blandly. "I'm ready to swear a dozen head of my pure-bred heifers are in Ezra's pasture right now."

Pat nodded. His face was as expressionless as though it had been carved from granite. "He's your prisoner, Sheriff."

Ezra stood motionless with his head hanging. He was completely dazed, as though robbed of all will of his own. He submitted wordlessly when Tripo took him by the arm and led him out the door toward the jail.

"Now that's mighty handsome of you, Stevens," Harlow said expansively. "I'm willing to admit I misjudged you. Frankly, I didn't make my charge against Ezra while you were still sheriff because I feared your loyalty toward an old friend might be stronger than your sense of duty. I owe you an apology and I'll buy a drink."

Pat said, "That'll be fine," tonelessly. He moved to the bar with Harlow.

"You others come on, too," Harlow called jovially to Boyd, Winters and Pete who had come out of the back room. "I'm setting up the drinks."

"Why no," said John Boyd thoughtfully. "I was always sorta choosy who I drink with." He looked at Pat as he said it, then turned back to Sam Sloan who was beginning to come around. Winters and Pete followed him, stony-faced, not looking at Pat.

Harlow laughed heartily as they went out. "Men like that are always carrying a grudge, eh?" He nudged Pat. "I'm glad to see you've got better sense."

Pat said, "Thanks." He accepted a drink from Harlow and lifted it to his lips.

CHAPTER V

SALLY had gone to bed by the time Pat got back to the ranch. The house lay dark and silent in the soft moonlight. Pat was glad Sally had gone to bed without waiting up for him. He hoped she would be asleep. It was an indication of the new feeling of security that had come to all of them in the Valley. It was only in the last few years that Sally had been able to force herself to turn in while her husband was still out.

Now, things were going to be different again. The old dangers were back, and the old fears would inevitably return with them.

All because of one man. All because of Eustis Harlow's inordinate ambitions to control the whole of Powder Valley. A cold rage burned inside Pat Stevens as he thought about it. It would be the same all over the Valley after tonight. The feeling of security would be shattered by tonight's events. Neighbor would be taking sides against neighbor and a fierce mistrust would drive wedges between the strongest friendships. It had already started, he recalled.

He wasn't angry at Winters and Boyd. They were honest and straightforward men who believed in meeting any challenge straight on, who couldn't understand compromise with right for the sake of expediency. His anger was directed at Eustis Harlow who had brought about the situation that drove Pat to seemingly turn against his friends.

SALLY stirred and turned her head on the pillow. She opened her eyes and stared up at him, waking as easily and trustfully as a child. "Is that you, dear?"

Pat said, "It's me."

Sally sat upright, clutching the blanket up about her throat. Her eyes widened in the dim light and she asked, "Are you coming to bed?"

"Just a minute," Pat mumbled. He put both gunbelts behind him to hide them from her searching gaze.

"You've got your guns," she cried

out with a sharp note of alarm. "You're trying to slip out with them. You weren't going to waken me, Pat."

"Well now, I didn't want you to worry, old lady," Pat drawled defensively. When he called her "old lady" in that tone, Sally knew he was badly upset. She threw the cover aside and reached down beside the bed for a pair of beaded moccasins, warning him, "Don't you dare go off without telling me about it." She stood up and caught hold of his arm tightly.

"It ain't much," he lied. "Some of the boys drank a little too much beer in town. Figured I might have to lock some of 'em up."

"And you rode all the way home to get your guns just for that?" Sally scoffed at him. "You know you can never lie to me, Pat."

He sighed deeply. He knew he couldn't. He went out to the living room and Sally followed him. In her white muslin nightgown that came all the way down to her moccasined feet, with its gathering of blue ribbon around the throat, she looked like a slender and frightened little girl standing there in the yellow lamplight.

Pat couldn't stand to look at her. He lowered his gaze and became very busy swinging the heavy belts about his waist and settling the heavy holsters low on each hip.

Sally studied him in complete silence. When she finally spoke, there was a queer little catch in her voice, "You've forgotten your star again, dear."

Pat said heavily, "I haven't forgotten it, Sally." He jerked one of the belts tighter than necessary and forced the brass tongue of the buckle into the last hole. He drew in a deep breath and looked up at her. "I've done resigned."

Sally didn't move. Her arms hung straight down at her sides, and she balled her hands up into fists in a convulsive and involuntary reaction to his words. She echoed, "Resigned?" and the single word resounded thunderously in Pat's ears in the night-silence that followed.

He swallowed down a lump in his throat and grinned wryly. "That's right. Some of the fellows decided maybe I've been sheriff of Powder Valley long enough an' had ought to give some other jasper a chance."

"Who?" Sally's voice was like a whiplash.

"Why . . . just some of the fellows."

"Who did they give your star to?"

"Waddie by the name of Tripo."

Sally caught her lower lip between her teeth. She said, "I don't know anybody named Tripo."

"From down Texas-way. He's sorta new in the Valley. An' you know the ol' saying . . . 'bout a new broom sweepin' clean."

SALLY went to him quickly. "You're not telling me the truth, Pat. Not all of it. Was that why you weren't invited to the meeting tonight? Is that why Ezra didn't want you to go? Because he knew your supposed friends were going to vote you out of the sheriff's job behind your back? After all you've done for the Valley?"

"Well, I reckon Ezra an' some of the others thought maybe it'd be easier on me not bein' there," Pat admitted uncomfortably.

"Oh, Pat! How could they do a thing like that to you?" Sally's small fist pounded at his shoulder and tears of anger came into her eyes. "Damn them, oh *damn*. . . ."

"Shh." Pat grinned and put a big hand over her mouth. "Cussin' right out loud," he reproved her. "Yo're gettin' mighty tough in yore old age."

"I mean it," she said stoutly. "I'd say worse if I knew the right words. It was mean and cruel of them to do that. Just let me find out which ones voted against you. I'll tell them a thing or two. I'll. . . ."

"No, Sally," said Pat sharply. "They're not to blame. Not one of 'em. They're caught. They had to vote right when Harlow cracked the whip."

"Harlow?"

"That's right. It was him that engineered the whole deal. Tripo is his right-hand man an' he wanted

him for sheriff instead of me. So Mister Harlow pulled some strings. Lotsa people owe him money, Sally. He's been loanin' money right free-like to anybody that wanted some."

"What reason did he have for wanting another sheriff?"

"Claims he's been havin' cattle rustled an' I ain't done nothing to stop it."

"Has he?"

"I dunno. He claims Ezra has stole a dozen head of his blooded stuff an' has got 'em in his pasture right now. He made it look like I hadn't done nothing because Ezra's my pardner."

"Oh, Pat! How terrible. You know Ezra wouldn't steal anything."

"Shore. *I* know it. But I reckon he'll have proof. I'm not doubtin' that there's a dozen head of his stuff in Ezra's pasture right now."

"Then he must have put them there," Sally said fiercely.

"Why, yes. I reckon maybe that's the way of it."

"Then Ezra ought to get out there and run them back into the VX ranch where they belong."

Pat sighed. "Trouble is, Ezra can't do it. Not right now."

"Why not?"

"He's in jail."

SALLY drew back and stared up into Pat's face in consternation. "You mean the new sheriff arrested Ezra already? It's a good thing Sam wasn't there. With him always carrying his gun in town there would have been trouble sure. And I'm glad you didn't wear yours tonight."

"Sam was there," Pat told her gently.

"Oh. Is he all right? I mean . . . he didn't get hurt?"

Pat said, "He's all right, excepting for a bump on the chin."

"Then there was a fight. Well, *tell* me about it," wailed Sally. "Don't stand there like a bump on a log. What happened? Was there any shooting?"

Pat shook his head. "I hit Sam," he said briefly, "an' then took his gun and held it on Ezra an' walked him out to the new sheriff. That's all there is to tell."

Sally took a step backward, her blue eyes rounded in dismay. "You knocked Sam down? And then marched Ezra out with Sam's gun?"

"That's right."

"But you weren't sheriff any more. You didn't have to help arrest Ezra. How could you do a thing like that to Ezra and Sam?"

"Seemed like a good idea," Pat said mildly. He leaned down to pull on his boots.

"Why did you come home for your gun? Where are you going now?"

"Thought I'd take a little ride." Pat's voice was grim. He didn't look at Sally.

"It's trouble, isn't it?" she asked in a subdued voice. "You're not giving up so easily. You're going to fight Eustis Harlow and his gang of gunfighters."

"Why, I hate to see a fellow like that come in an' mess things up in the Valley."

"But they've got the law on their side now," Sally said with sharp fright. "They'll be laying for you, Pat. There'll be just you and your two guns against them all."

"There's been times before when the law was against me," Pat reminded her with bleak quietude. "Couple of times I can remember when you knew I was going up against somethin' like that. An' one of them times there was only the two of us. . . you an' me. . . against the law and the whole of the Valley."

Sally's face tightened. She nodded her head slowly. "I'm thinking of those times too," she said breathlessly. "Oh, darling, I thought all that was ended. I thought we could go on and live here peacefully."

"Not while there's men like Eustis. Harlow wantin' to crowd other folks off ranches that's rightfully theirs," grated Pat. "You wouldn't want me to back down from something like that."

"No, Pat," Sally told him gravely. "I wouldn't want you to back down from fighting for what's right. Ever." She went to him steadily and put her hands on his shoulders. She lifted her face to him and there was an unafraid

smile on her lips. Her eyes were alight with a radiance born of the frontier spirit within her. "I knew you wouldn't turn your back on Sam and Ezra. Go on out with your guns and show those people that the men of Powder Valley will still fight for their homes."

Pat said awkwardly, "Yo're mighty wonderful, old lady." He kissed her on the lips and held her tight for a moment, then put her away from him and turned to stride out of the door.

Sally stood in the middle of the floor and watched him go. Her eyes were so misted with tears that she couldn't see him, but the smile remained on her lips and there was a hard pounding of pride within her breast.

CHAPTER VI

"TAKE it easy, Sam," Mr. Winters warned the express rider as Sam Sloan sat up on the floor in the back room of the Gold Eagle Saloon and looked around dazedly.

Sam rubbed his jaw and blinked up at Winters. Then his gaze went slowly to the faces of John Boyd and Pete, the Lazy Mare rider who had brought them word of Ezra's impending arrest.

"What hit me?" Sam demanded. "I didn't see no mule backin' up to me."

The other three men looked at each other uneasily. None of them said anything.

"Where's Pat an' Ezra?" Sam went on. "They was both standin' here when I got kicked in the face." He slowly got to his feet and his hand instinctively went to the empty holster at his hip. "An' my hawg-leg's gone," he interjected. "What in hell happened? You rannies all got lockjaw?"

"Pat took yore gun," Boyd told him.

"Pat? Oh, I get it." Sam nodded with a rueful grin. "Musta bin Pat that handed me one on thuh jaw." A note of admiration crept into his voice. "Then I reckon he lifted my six-gun an' herded Ezra out past the sheriff that wanted to arrest him. Doggoned fightin' fool. He didn't want me tuh get mixed up in no trouble account of Kitty so he done it all by his ownself. Was there any shootin' when he took Ezra out?"

"It didn't happen just that way," Winters said dryly. "Pat knocked you out an' took your gun all right. And he marched Ezra out with it, but not *past* the new sheriff."

"Didn't make it, huh?" Sam's jaw jutted belligerently. "What're we all waitin' fer back here then, like we was holdin' a wake over a corpse? Pat didn't. . . he didn't get gunned down out yonder by thuh new sheriff?"

"I'm trying to tell you the straight of it," Winters said patiently. "Pat went kinda crazy, I reckon. Seemed like he forgot he'd turned in his badge an' thought he still had a lawman's job to do. He held your gun on Ezra and turned him over to Tripo to take to jail soon's he heard what the charge was."

Sam stood very still, his eyes boring into Winters. "Pat did *what?*"

Winters sighed and nodded. "Yep. I'm telling it to you straight. Looks like something funny must've happened to Pat during these years while he's been sheriff. Don't you reckon that's it, John?" He turned to look at Boyd.

The old rancher nodded slowly. His leathery face was harsh and his eyes were cold and uncompromising. "I never thought Pat'd throw in with a man like Harlow if I hadn't seen it happen with my own eyes. An' after all that talk Pat give us in here too."

"What charge'd they make ag'in Ezra?" Sam demanded. His black eyes were beginning to smolder with repressed anger.

"R u s t l i n' Harlow's high-bred stock," Boyd grated. "Harlow claims Ezra had stole a dozen of 'em an' has got 'em penned up on his new ranch."

"An' Pat believed that about Ezra?" Sam asked in a tone of utter incomprehension.

"Yep. I reckon he did. He told

Tripo to put him in jail, an' then he started drinkin' with Harlow friendly as a little spotted dawg that's been kicked in the ribs."

Sam Sloan's shoulders sagged. He took a faltering step forward and sank down into a chair. "It don't make sense," he muttered blankly. "Pat knows Ezra wouldn't steal no cows. We all know he wouldn't." His eyes appealed to the others.

WINTERS nodded shortly. He drew up a chair opposite Sam Sloan. "It looks like Pat's lost his head over some idea of keeping law and order in the Valley."

"An' there ain't a gun among the lot of us," Sam groaned with a searching look at the others. "What're we gonna do?"

Boyd and Pete sat down also. Pete opened his tight lips to say, "Guns in our saddlebags."

"Whose saddlebags?"

"Mine, an' t'other boys from the Lazy Mare. We brung 'em in thinkin' there might be trouble." It was a long speech for Pete. He began to roll a cigarette after completing it.

"And I've got guns in my store," Winters reminded Sam. "But I sure hate to go against Pat in this thing. Him acting that way is what buffaloes me."

"To hell with Pat," Sam ejaculated, his dark face livid with anger. "I ain't lettin' 'em keep Ezra locked up. Not me. I've done let Pat twist me aroun' his finger the last time. How 'bout you, Pete? Pat's yore boss. You goin' along with him or throwin' in with us?"

Pete said, "I'm here, ain't I?"

"Awright." Sam's eyes were very bright. "S'posin' you hunt up the other boys an' all three of you empty yore saddlebags? John an' me'll mosey over tuh Winters' store an' pick us out a couple of six-shooters from stock. That makes five of us an' I reckon five is enough tuh tear the jail apart an' get Ezra out."

"Make it six," Winters said quietly.

"No need fer you tuh mix in it," Sam said quickly. Winters was a substantial businessman and one of the strongest advocates of legal methods in the Valley. Unlike the others, he had never packed a gun on his hip even in the old days of lawlessness, and Sam knew that he had an aversion to any sort of gun-play.

"That's right," Boyd put in quickly. "You'll be doin' yore part by unlockin' the store an' outfittin' Sam an' me. If things go wrong nobody needs to know you had any part in it."

"I've got a sawed-off gun in the back of the store," said Winters flatly. "This is one time when I'm willing to go against what looks like the legal way. I think it's time Eustis Harlow finds out we're not all spotted dogs here in the Valley."

There was a little silence in the back room of the saloon after the storekeeper's words. All of them were thinking of Pat Stevens and Boyd's description of the way he had acted. All of them felt sort of sick inside about it.

Sam stirred first. He shook his head briefly as though to dismiss the the black thoughts obsessing him, and pushed back his chair. "Ain't no use us settin' around here," he observed with finality. "Wishin' ain't gonna get Ezra out of jail."

The others got up with him. Sam pushed the door open and stalked out into the saloon. It wasn't as full as it had been. Pat was gone, and neither Harlow nor any of his gang were there. Men turned from the bar and looked curiously at the grim-faced men who came out of the back room. Their faces indicated that they had been discussing the group behind the closed door, and wondering what they might do.

The bartender came hurrying down from the front of the bar and greeted Sam jovially, "Got something here that belongs to you, Sam."

"That so?" Sam Sloan stopped and squinted at him suspiciously. "What is it?"

"Your six-gun," the bartender told him. He reached under the bar and pulled out Sam's .45. "Pat Stevens gave it to me to keep for you," he explained. "He told me to tell you not

to forget you're riding the mail in the morning and that Kitty will be looking for you."

SAM nodded grimly. He took the weapon and holstered it. Pete drifted on past him and drew the other two Lazy Mare punchers aside. He spoke to them for a moment, and then the trio went outside to their saddled horses at the hitch-rail. Sam turned to Winters and said gruffly, "It looks like I won't need to go over to thuh store with yuh. Why don't you take John over an' get him fixed up, an' I'll meet you-all outside in about five minutes."

Winters nodded, and he and the rancher went out. Sam turned back to the bar and grunted, "Pour me out a shot of red-eye, Alex."

The bartender poured him a drink.

"Where's ever'body at?" Sam asked in a low voice.

Alex glanced up at the row of men still at the bar, and answered out of the side of his mouth, "Harlow gathered up his hands and took out right after Pat left."

"All of 'em?"

"All except Tripo and a couple of them he deputized to guard the jail. I reckon they figure some of Ezra's friends might try to pull a jailbreak."

Sam grunted something unintelligible deep in his throat. He tossed off the drink of whisky and set the glass down. When he reached in his pocket for payment, the bartender backed away and said hastily, "Your drink's paid for. Harlow laid out the cash for drinks for everybody when he set them up to Pat."

Sam's face remained expressionless. He pulled out a silver half dollar and spun it across the bar. "I reckon I'll buy my own." He tugged his hat lower over his eyes and strolled out.

Pete and the other two punchers were waiting for him on the boardwalk outside. They had gotten their guns and cartridge belts out of their saddlebags, and all were armed.

"We'll walk on down to the store," Sam suggested. "Pick up John an' Winters there, an' then spread out to surround the jail."

Pete fell in step beside Sam, and his two younger companions trailed along behind. They recognized Pete as their leader, and they had obeyed him without question when he came out of the back room and drew them aside to say they were to assist Sam Sloan in a jail break to rescue Ezra. They might not have agreed so readily had they known everything that had happened behind the closed door of the back room for they worshiped their employer and were intensely loyal to him; but Pete had given the impression that the whole thing had been prearranged with Pat before Ezra was arrested, so they came along unquestioningly.

As they left the lights of the Gold Eagle behind them, the boardwalk became dark and the only sound in the night was the hard thudding of eight bootheels on the pine boards. Except for the laggards still in the saloon, the rest of Dutch Springs was asleep and unaware of the desperate plan afoot to free the imprisoned Ezra.

A GLIMMER of light showed ahead through the dirty and cobwebbed windows of Mr. Winters' general store. It blinked out as they approached the store, and two dark figures emerged from the door to wait for them on the boardwalk.

John Boyd had a long-barreled .45 swinging in his hand while the storekeeper had a double-barreled, sawed-off shotgun resting easily in the crook of his left arm.

"I didn't bother to get a belt an' holster," Boyd explained, hefting the weight of the six-gun anxiously. "You figger we'll just walk up an' blast 'em, Sam?"

"Did Tripo stay at the jail?" Winters put in. "Or did he just lock Ezra up and ride back to the ranch with the key in his pocket? I brought along a short wrecking bar to force the door if we can't get hold of a key," he added.

"I reckon we'll find a key there," Sam grunted. "Alex at the Gold Eagle says Tripo depytized two of the VX hands to guard the jail tuhnight. He most likely left a key with them. Le's split up," he suggested.

"You can see a light in the office back of thuh jail from here. They must be settin' up there watchin'."

"The less shooting there is the better the whole thing will be," Winters said firmly as the six men moved forward toward the gleam of light showing from the sheriff's office in the lean-to at the back of the jail. "This is bad enough if we can pull it off without anybody being killed," he went on to Sam. "A sawed-off shotgun is a mighty handy thing to throw a scare into a man. That's why I insisted on bringing it along. I think if I can sneak up to the window unobserved and cover them with the shotgun, some of the rest of you can go in the door and disarm them and get the key without any trouble."

"I'd like tuh run into some trouble," said Sam angrily. "Me, I'm jest itchin' to fill them depyties full of lead."

"No," said Winters sharply. "They're just hired hands, Sam. They're not to blame for taking orders from Harlow. Let's stop here." They were just across the street from the jail which was situated behind the new courthouse building. "You, Dick. Stay here on the corner to keep watch," he ordered one of the Lazy Mare hands. "Stop anyone who tries to ride closer to the jail while we're there. And you go across to the opposite corner and do the same," he told the other cowpoke. "You come with me, Sam, and we'll go around back to the window while Pete and Boyd go up to the door. You and Pete wait until we cover them from the window," he told Boyd. "Then go in and get their guns."

Boyd nodded and he and Pete moved away. Sam wanted to protest this plan because it seemed too easy and didn't offer much chance of any shooting, but he realized it was the sensible way to work the jail delivery and he went along by Winters' side without arguing but not without the inward hope that the two new deputies would be foolhardy enough to go for their guns in the face of a shotgun and his .45.

The figures of Pete and John Boyd blended with the moonlit night and were swallowed up in the haze. Winters and Sam crossed the dusty road silently and moved across the courthouse yard on tiptoe to come up behind the adobe lean-to. The single square window was small and was set high in the adobe wall. It was a square blob of light that seemed to beckon them on, as though it were an eye that watched their approach and wondered why they came so *slowly*.

Sam stayed a pace in advance of the storekeeper, bent forward almost double for the dual purpose of making himself as inconspicuous as possible and to scan the ground more closely for rocks or dry branches that might betray them to the men inside the office.

His hand was on his gun, and he loosened it in the holster as he reached the shadow of the jail. The lean-to was at the other end of the the squat building. He stopped and listened intently, but could hear no sound from the other side of the building to indicate that Boyd and Pete were closing in also. He turned his head and whispered to Winters who had stopped right behind him, "We better wait a minute tuh be shore John an' Pete are ready."

Winters nodded his head. He held the shotgun down in front of him with one hand clutching the double muzzles and the other with a finger crooked about the triggers. He was completely cool, and Sam Sloan marveled at the storekeeper's composure. A man would think, by golly, that he was in the habit of engineering a jail break every night.

"THEY ought to be at the door by now," Winters whispered, and he stepped past Sam toward the lighted widow.

Sam unholstered his gun and followed him. They crept along in the shadow of the wall, stooping beneath the window ledge that was at about the height of Sam's shoulders.

The heavy night silence persisted unbroken. Not a sound came from inside the lighted office, and there was nothing to indicate that two other armed men were waiting in front of the door of the office on the other side.

Sam couldn't wait any longer. Every fiber in his tough frame craved for action. He nudged Winters with his left elbow, straightened up and smashed the single square pane of glass with his gun-barrel.

Winters came erect simultaneously, and as the broken glass clattered inward noisily he thrust the short muzzle of the shotgun through the aperture and warned loudly, "Put up your hands quick."

He and Sam stood in the full glare of a lantern hanging from the ceiling inside and blinked stupidly at the interior of the office before their eyes focused so they could see clearly.

Then Sam muttered, "I'll be damned. Do you see what I think I see?"

Winters chuckled at his tone and said, "We can't both be seeing things, Sam."

They were staring in through the unglassed window at an unexpected and curious scene. The two deputies lay on the floor with bandanna gags tied over their mouths and their hands bound behind them.

The door was flung open as Winters and Sam stared at them, and Pete and John Boyd stood on the threshold brandishing their guns. Their mouths hung open as they saw the helpless deputies on the floor, and the two pair of would-be jail-breakers stared at each other in utter incomprehesion from opposite sides of the building.

With a disgusted grunt, Sam stepped back from the window and hurried around to the door. By the time he got there, Boyd and Pete were jerking the gags from the mouths of the VX riders who had been deputized to guard Ezra.

They sat up, sputtering incoherently, and the story tumbled from their lips while Boyd cut their hands free.

They hadn't more than settled down to guard the jail, they told the amused Dutch Springs deputation, before a masked man walked in the door and covered them with a .45 before either of them could go for his guns.

He disarmed them and then bound and gagged them securely, got the key to the jail from them and left them lying there while he went around and freed the prisoner they were supposed to be guarding. Both of them bitterly averred that Dutch Springs was one hell of a town, and being a deputy was one hell of a job. They couldn't tell what the masked man looked like except he was tall and dressed like any rancher and handled his gun like he knew what it was made for.

The Powder Valley quartet was shaking with helpless inward laughter when they withdrew from the jail office and the two discomfited deputies.

"It was *Pat,*" Sam breathed happily as they hurried away. "Doggone his ornery hide, he musta planned it that way all thuh time. We orta knowed Pat had somethin' up his sleeve. He figgered Tripo an' the others would leave town soon as they thought Ezra was locked up good, an' he'd have a better chance of gettin' him loose afterward than I woulda had of shootin' a way out of the Gold Eagle with all them around."

"It looks that way," Winters agreed soberly. "Makes us look like a bunch of danged fools, slipping up on the jail when the prisoner was already gone."

"Pat could of told some of us an' let us help him," protested Boyd angrily.

"It's better thisaway," Sam chortled happily. "Wearin' a mask, can't nobody swear 'twas him. With Harlow an' all the rest thinkin' Pat was takin' it laying down him an' Ezra will have a chance to cut them VX cows outta Ezra's herd before Harlow ever proves his frame-up."

The others dubiously agreed that Sam was probably right, and Mr. Winters for one was much relieved when he went back to the store and put up his lethal shotgun. For a brief period tonight he had been a man of violence and he was glad to turn the job back to men who knew much more about such things than he.

CHAPTER VII

THE younger child was restless, and Nancy Page was up with her when Ethan reached home a little before midnight. Ethan Page was a tall raw-boned young rancher with big-knuckled hands that showed the marks of hard work. He and Nan-

cy had been married seven years and were one of the most completely happy young couples in Powder Valley.

The first years of their marriage had been difficult, taking over a small run-down ranch on the western end of the Valley after the death of Ethan's shiftless father, and both Nancy and her husband had toiled hard and uncompromisingly to get the ranch restocked and the house fixed up, building for the future and the snug security of their family.

When her husband came in an hour later Molly's fever had gone down and she was breathing easily. She had just dropped off to sleep in her mother's arms, and Nancy hadn't carried her back to her crib yet. She sat on the side of the bed with the baby cuddled in her arms, and with her brown hair in two long braided plaits hanging down on each side of her face she looked no older than a schoolgirl herself.

She lifted her head and smiled reassuringly at Ethan when he stopped in the doorway. "There's nothing to worry about," she told him softly. "Molly was restless and I took her up, but she's gone back to sleep now."

Some of the worry went away from Ethan's dark, serious face, but Nancy noted instantly that some of it remained. He said, "I hurried right in when I saw the light burning. If you're sure Molly's all right I'll go back and put up my hawse."

Nancy Page sighed as she got up from the edge of the bed and carried Molly in to her crib.

She wondered if anything had gone wrong with the loan Ethan had arranged to get from Mr. Harlow. The thought brought a sharp stab of fear to her heart. That loan meant so much to them. In the beginning, Ethan had been dubious about the wisdom of putting a mortgage on the small ranch as security, but in the end had decided it would be foolish not to do so.

Somehow, Ethan Page had a horror of being in debt. His father had been a shiftless man who stayed deeply in debt all his life. After his father's death it had taken every penny Ethan could scrape together to clear the estate of debt and pay his father's funeral expenses. And on that day Ethan had sworn a solemn oath that *his* family should never be burdened with debts as his father's family had been.

NANCY trembled now as she wondered if anything had happened in Dutch Springs tonight to upset the anticipated loan. There had been something rather mysterious about the summons that took Ethan to town. One of Harlow's riders had come by about dusk and told Ethan he was expected at some sort of a meeting. Ethan told her about it at the supper table. He admitted he didn't know what the meeting was about. The rider hadn't told him. Except that it had been arranged by Eustis Harlow and Ethan was expected to attend.

She heard her husband come in the front door and close it behind him. His footsteps were slow and solid across the living room. Her heart contracted with love and with fear for him. She didn't mind for herself. She could go on being poor and doing without things and making over dresses for the third or fourth time, but she closed her eyes and prayed briefly not to let Ethan be disappointed about the loan.

When she concluded her prayer and opened her eyes, Ethan was in the room. He smiled down briefly at his wife and began unbuttoning the leather jacket he wore over his flannel shirt. When the smile flickered away from his face he looked older and graver then he had ever looked before.

She asked, "How was the meeting tonight?"

"Not to good." He threw his jacket aside and didn't look at her.

Nancy lifted herself on one elbow. "Something's bothering you, Ethan."

He said, "Yep."

"Don't be worried about Molly. I don't think it was anything but a little touch of indigestion."

"That's good." Ethan Page stripped off his shirt and sat down on the edge of the bed with his back to her. He leaned over to tug at his boots and his voice sounded muffled, "We're not going to take that loan from Harlow, honey."

She remained very still, her body lifted on one elbow, staring at his bent back. Something went dead inside her. Something that rose up in her throat and choked her so she couldn't speak. She could hear her heart pounding loudly in the stillness. Slowly and carefully she lowered herself back to the pillow.

"Aren't we, Ethan?"

"Nope." He pulled off one boot and it thudded against the wall across the small room. "I'm sorry, hon, but we'll just keep on bein' poor and getting along like we have been."

"That's all right," she told him gently. "I don't mind, Ethan."

"I wanted it mostly for you," he blurted out. "I wanted you to have things other women have. And I wanted to make more money. . . so you could keep on having nice things."

"I know." Her voice comforted him. "It doesn't matter. I've got the children. . .and you. And we're young and healthy."

He pulled off his other boot and stood up in his bare feet. He turned and his dark eyes brooded down at her. "You don't know how plumb wonderful you are, Nancy." His voice was unsteady. "I've been dreadin' having to come home and tell you. Don't you think I don't know how you've scrimped an' done without?"

"It doesn't matter. Money isn't everything." To her own surprise, Nancy smiled and her voice was tender and strong. "What happened to make you change your mind?"

"That meeting tonight." Ethan's young face flushed dark with anger. "Know what they did? Voted Pat Stevens out as sheriff of Powder Valley and turned his star over to Eustis Harlow's foreman. Fellow named Tripo. A two-gunned rattlesnake from Texas."

"They voted Pat out?" Nancy echoed incredulously. "Who did that?"

"Fellows at the meeting. It was a put-up job," Ethan went on harshly. "Harlow worked it. He claims Pat hasn't done anything to stop cattle rustling off his ranch an' said we needed a new sheriff working for a salary. Offered to pay half of it himself if we'd kick Pat out."

"*You* didn't vote against Pat Stevens?" Nancy protested in a horrified voice.

"Didn't come to a showdown. Pat walked in while the talk was goin' on, and he resigned. Pulled off his badge an' gave it to Harlow. But I had my orders on how to vote before the meeting," he went on harshly. "Mr. Harlow called me off to the side an' told me he expected me to go along with him if I wanted that loan."

NANCY was aghast. "What did you tell him?"

"Right then I didn't tell him yes or no," Ethan admitted. "Plum flabbergasted me, sort of, and I still didn't know what was up. Then I saw he had the meeting packed with men he *has* loaned money to. Morrel and Simpson, old man Tucker, Jimmie Peters. The whole gang he's been soft soaping along. There they were, scared of him an' ready to jump if he cracked the whip. Each one of them with all their hired hands ready to vote the way Harlow said. I tell you it made me sick to my belly, Nancy. I saw that, where *I'd* be if I took that loan from him."

"What happened? Tell me all about it."

"Soon as he got Tripo in for sheriff he accused one-eyed Ezra of stealing his cattle. You know, Ezra's taken over the old Spangler ranch just east of the VX. So Tripo arrested Ezra and put him in jail."

"But everybody knows Ezra wouldn't steal," wailed Nancy. "He may not be the smartest man in the Valley, but he's *good*. And he's certainly as honest as the day is long."

"Shore he is. That's what makes my blood boil. The way I see it, Harlow wants to get hold of the Spangler ranch to spread out his place. If he can keep Ezra in jail's he'll have a chance to buy it in, maybe."

"But that's dishonest," protested Nancy. "That's downright crooked, Ethan."

"That's when I decided we didn't want to be beholden to a man like that. If I went ahead and borrowed from him on a mortgage I'd have to

be like the rest and knuckle down when he said to. So I told him it was off and told him I wanted that mortgage back that he's had drawn up."

"Did you get it back?"

"Not tonight. He said it was at the ranch. But I haven't signed it yet so it don't matter." Ethan Page turned away from her and began to unbuckle his levis.

"I'm glad you did, Ethan." Nancy spoke with spirit. "I'm proud you told him off. Why, Pat Stevens and Sam and Ezra *made* this Valley. You know that. They've risked their lives for us a dozen times. Of course we have to stand behind them."

"That's the way I figured it. Even if we do have to go slow the next few years." Ethan was pulling off his undershirt and his voice was muffled.

HE DIDN'T hear the small sound just outside the bedroom window the undershirt over his head prevented him seeing the blued muzzle of a .45 resting on the window ledge pointing at him.

Nancy heard the sound, and she turned her head in that direction the very instant that the muzzle erupted flame and lead. Her scream blended with the roar of exploding gunpowder.

She saw her husband stagger forward and go to the floor, and she started up in time to receive a second slug in her heart. She sank back with a little moan and didn't answer Ethan Junior's terrified cry of childish fright from the other room.

She lay very still and the padding of bare feet into the room was the only sound now in the midnight silence enveloping the small ranch house.

Six-year-old Ethan Page Junior stopped in the doorway and looked solemnly at the figure of his father huddled on the floor, and blinked at the spreading stain of crimson on the pine floor. He lifted his befuddled eyes and saw a terrifying apparition outside the open bedroom window. It was a man with red whiskers and a terribly scarred face. A one-eyed man who leered at the bewildered little boy for a moment before he disappeared in the darkness.

That's all little Ethan Page could tell about the murder of his parents the next day after their bodies were discovered by a passing rider. And his younger sister slept right on through the shooting, so she couldn't add anything at all to Ethan Junior's terrified tale.

CHAPTER VIII

JAKE MUNORT was a crabbed old man who lived alone on a small place across the valley from the Pages. His ranch wasn't much. He had only six sections under fence and he ran less than a hundred head of cattle on it. It was rich ranch land, and with proper supervision would have supported more than twice that many cows, but old man Munort was too lazy and too cantankerous to bother about trying to keep his ranch up. He was all alone in the world and it provided for his simple needs and he wasn't interested in anything else. He had a Mexican lad who worked for him and lived in a little shack down the creek from his house, and together the two of them managed to keep the ranch going.

Above all else, Jake Munort resisted change and modernization. He resented all the modern improvements that his neighbors went in for, and loudly bewailed the passing of the good old days when there weren't any fences to bother a man and the accepted way of building up a herd was to spread a wide loop and work fast with a hot running iron. The newfangled ranching methods were ruining the country, he complained, and the breed of men and cows was growing softer as each year went by.

Jake laughed at Eustis Harlow when he first came to him with a proposal to lend him money to fix the ranch up and put in new stock. He felt the same way about selling his ranch, even for a sum of money easily more than twice what it was worth. He had lived on those six sections all his life, by golly, and he planned to die on them. He was comfortable in his little two-room log house, and he reckoned he wouldn't be comfortable anywhere else in the world.

Harlow argued with the old man in vain, raising his price to almost double his original offer, but Jake Munort remained adamant.

"Nosiree," he exploded finally, "I ain't sellin' an' that's final." He slammed a gnarled fist into his leathery palm and glared at the Texan. "You must be crazy tuh want to buy it nohow. Anybody in the Valley'll tell you my place ain't wuth a damn."

"I'm not crazy," Harlow assured him with a thin smile. "Your six sections join up against Simpson's place and I'm loaning him money to make improvements and expand. You're standing in the way of development, Mr. Munort."

The old man snorted loudly. "Leroy Simpson allus wuz a danged fool. I reckon yo're lookin' tuh foreclose him an' then add my six sections onto his place. I'll be dead fust, I kin tell you that."

"All right," said Harlow equably. "I'm not in any hurry. I guess I can wait that long."

"I'm mighty tough," Munort told him seriously. "Good fer a lot of years yet, I reckon."

Eustis Harlow said, "Maybe," and left it like that.

JAKE MUNORT was old and crabbed and set in his ways, but he was far from being a fool. He kept his mouth shut and his ears open and observed how Harlow was lending large sums of money to various ranchers throughout the Valley at ridiculously low interest rates, and how the recipients were spending the money foolishly on things they didn't need, and he began to realize Harlow's plan to gain control of the entire Valley.

He didn't say anything about it to anyone, but he made his own private plans to circumvent Harlow.

With no living relatives to leave his ranch to, he knew it would be thrown on the open market in the event of his death, and he shrewdly suspected that Harlow had investigated and knew this also.

It was right after Ezra bought the Spangler place right out from under Harlow's nose that Munort got his great idea. He knew Ezra and liked him, and he thought Ezra was too sensible to borrow money from the Texan or buckle down to him. So he made a trip to Pueblo by the stage one day, and consulted a lawyer in that city. He had the lawyer draw up an iron-bound will leaving his property to Ezra in the event of his death, and then he returned to Powder Valley slyly elated at the way he'd fixed things so Harlow couldn't touch his six sections even after he died.

He didn't tell anyone in the Valley what he had done, but settled back down on his ranch to keep on living just as he had before.

ONE OF the delights of Jake Munort's old age was the chokecherry wine he made each summer. There was a thick growth of the bushes along the creek running through his place, and every summer he gathered bushels of the red berries when they were ripe and hanging in thick clusters from the bushes.

He liked to sit by himself in the darkness before a flickering fire of dry mesquite roots in the fireplace and doze through the long evenings while he sipped his wine and got just drunk enough to stagger off to bed and to sleep, for he didn't sleep well in these later years and without his two tin cups of chokecherry wine he was likely to lie awake and toss around until dawn.

It was midnight and Jake Munort was well along toward finishing his second cup of wine when he heard a horse ridden up into the yard just outside his cabin. The old man was dozing along in a torpid state of relaxation. He wondered if the rider would be Simpson on his way back from some meeting in Dutch Springs. Simpson had stopped by on his way in earlier to urge Jake to ride in with him, but the old rancher refused. He wasn't interested in meetings, and he particularly wasn't interested when Simpson told him it was something cooked up by Eustis Harlow.

"I'll set right here in front of the fireplace an' take it easy," Jake had told Simpson. "I reckon you feel like you gotta ride in 'cause Harlow says so, but me I don't jump through a hoop fer no man."

Simpson had flushed and angrily declared that he wasn't jumping through a hoop at Harlow's bidding either, that he was simply attending the meeting because he believed it was a citizen's duty to take an interest in community affairs, but old Jake just grunted sardonically and poured himself out a tin cup of wine and settled back to enjoy another long evening in his own way.

Now he cupped a hand behind his ear and listened to the sound of footsteps approaching the house. Didn't sound like Simpson's walk, he thought. His senses were dulled by wine but he could tell pretty good that it wasn't his closest neighbor. This man was taking heavy, solid steps, while Simpson sort of dragged along. Must be a stranger stopping by, Jake thought, for he hadn't any friends who would come to see him after midnight.

HE LEANED forward and picked up a charred stick to stir the smoldering fire into bright flames, then turned in his rawhide armchair to look at the man stepping inside his open door.

The leaping flames showed a bulky figure with red-whiskered face and a disfiguring scar down one side of it. He appeared to have only one eye and it was fixed malignantly on the old rancher.

Though his vision was blurred by drunkenness, Jake knew the man in the doorway must be Ezra. He called, "Come on in, Ezra," impatiently, and then he saw the gun in the newcomer's hand.

The muzzle swept up in a steady arc and covered him. Jake stared at it in disbelief and lifted one hand as though to ward off the inexplicable danger.

The six-gun thundered and a bullet crashed into Jake Munort's chest. He collapsed in his rawhide chair with a groan, and the bulky figure disappeared from the doorway. A moment later there was the sound of galloping hooves, and they swiftly receded into the night.

Jake Munort was still alive when Jose, the Mexican boy, came panting up from his shack a few minutes later. The rancher had strength to lift his head and gasp out, "Ezra! He shot me. Mus' be some mistake. I don' reckon. . ." His voice faded to nothingness and he died.

Jose had noted the time when he heard the shot and jumped out of bed. It was easy to figure about what time Ethan Page had reached home from town, and the condition of his partially unclothed body indicated that he had been murdered before he had time to get into bed. That set the time of his death a little more than half an hour before Jake was killed, just about time for a rider to gallop between the two ranches, and Jake's dying statement coupled with Ethan Junior's description of his parents' murderer made things look pretty black for Ezra the next day when people found out about Ezra's jail-break and began putting two and two together.

CHAPTER IX

"FOR THE last time, Ma, why won't you think it over?" George Kincaid's young voice rasped out angrily at his mother bent over a dishpan in the kitchen. He leaned in the doorway with a black felt hat pulled low over his thin face, twisted in a discontented scowl. George Kincaid was nineteen and he hated the ranch in Powder Valley. Ever since his father had died three years previously he had tried to urge his mother to sell the ranch and let him go to Denver where he vaguely planned to enter some sort of business.

Mrs. Dora Kincaid shook her gray head placidly. She was a stout, middle-aged woman with a cheerful, unlined face. "Robert Kincaid would turn over in his grave if I was to put a mortgage on this ranch," she told her son. "I mind his last words, spoken when he knew he was passing on. 'Dora', he said, 'promise me one thing, Dora, that you'll keep the ranch going for George to take over when him and Amanda get married. I'll die happy knowing it'll be waiting for him to settle down on and raise his young-uns like we raised him.' Them were your father's very words,

George, and I remember them like it was yesterday."

"But Manda and I don't want to settle down here on the ranch and raise a family, Ma. She wants to go to Denver just like I do. I don't know whether she'll even have me if I stick around here in Powder Valley."

"She'll have you if she loves you," Mrs. Kincaid told her son serenely. "If she don't love you you'll be better off finding it out right now 'stead of later on."

"But why are you so stubborn about it, Ma? A thousand dollars is all I need to get started in Denver. Mr. Harlow will loan us three thousand, and you can keep the rest of it and keep right on living here if you want to. If you won't sell it, that is. And I think you're crazy not to. Why, you could travel all over the world and live in luxury on the eight thousand he'd pay us outright for the place."

Dora Kincaid shook her head and kept on washing the supper dishes. "I don't want to have any truck with your Mr. Harlow. He's a slick one, son. You mark my words, he's up to no good for this Valley."

"That's all you know about it. He's the best thing that ever happened to us. Why, things are already different since he started in loaning money to help folks fix up their ranches. How do you think he made all *his* money, Ma? By sitting back and letting the world go by? No sir. He's up and coming. He's waking the Valley up."

"It did all right for a good many years before he came along. Your pa and I were happy enough here. And you were too until you went off to school and got a lot of silly city ideas in your head. You'd best get rid of them and start in helping me to run this place the way your father did."

"I'm going to see Mr. Harlow in town tonight," George told her sulkily. "There's some sort of meeting at the courthouse and he wants me to come. I told him I'd make one more try to make you see sense, and he said he was just about through holding his offer open and if we don't want the money there's others here in the Valley that do."

"Little credit to them," said his mother tartly. "You tell Mr. Harlow I said for him to go on and do anything he wants to with his money because we don't want to borrow it and the Lazy K isn't for sale either. Not for ten times eight thousand dollars."

"You're just a stick-in-the-mud," George groaned. "I don't know what Manda's going to say when I tell her."

"She'll come around," Mrs. Kincaid assured him. "After you're married you'll be glad you've got a home to bring her to."

"SHE just won't do it, Mr. Harlow," said George Kincaid an hour later in Dutch Springs. "I've talked till I'm blue in the face without getting anywhere."

"That's too bad. . .for you." Eustis Harlow shrugged his heavy shoulders. "As I told you, I can't hold my offer open forever. I'll take my money where it's wanted." He turned away abruptly to go toward a group of men loitering on the courthouse lawn, and George Kincaid stared after him miserably. There went his last chance to get away from Powder Valley to the city where he could be a gentleman.

His shoulders slumped wretchedly and he felt very sorry for himself. He went over to one of the kegs of beer and stayed there until the men filed inside the courthouse to open the meeting that resulted in Pat Stevens' resignation as sheriff of Powder Valley.

He went in behind the others and slumped down on a bench in the last row, and paid little attention to what went on. He left when the others did, and silently followed a group of them to the Gold Eagle where he drank numerous glasses of whisky on top of the free beer he'd poured down before the meeting. He witnessed Pat's capitulation to Harlow and Tripo, and the subsequent jailing of big, one-eyed Ezra.

He stayed on in the Gold Eagle, slumped laxly against the bar with his hat pulled low over his sullen eyes while he grew angrier and angrier at

his mother and her refusal to help him get away to the city.

After midnight the bartender refused to sell him any more whisky because of his youth and because he had had enough, but George was too miserable to care and he stayed on at the saloon until the new sheriff's two deputies came into the saloon cursing luridly about Ezra's escape from jail.

George stumbled out and mounted his horse to ride home soon after that. He was sober enough to stay in the saddle with a loose rein and let his horse pick his own way home, but he was drunk enough to feel utterly and completely sorry for himself. He was dozing in the saddle in a wretched state of self-pity when he reached the Lazy K ranch some time after midnight.

A couple of hundred yards from the dark ranch house the road led through a wire gate that was always kept closed. George roused himself enough at that point to note with some curiosity that the gate was now open.

He knew he had closed it when he rode out to Dutch Springs earlier in the evening. None of the other Lazy K hands had followed him to town and he didn't understand why it was open.

He checked his horse subconsciously as he rode through the gate, instinctively meaning to get down and close it behind him.

Just as he started to swing his right leg back over the saddle he heard the loud clear crash of a .45 up ahead at the dark ranch house where his mother was sleeping.

His horse tensed and pricked his ears forward. George remained as though petrified, half out of the saddle, his weight resting on his left foot in the stirrup, hands tightly on the pommel, while he stared ahead through the night and tried to think what the sound could have been other than a gun-shot. For he knew it couldn't be a gun-shot. He knew his mother was up there in the house alone, and she had a deadly fear of guns.

Then he heard the loud drumming of a horse's galloping hooves rapidly drawing toward him.

He slid back into the saddle and gripped the reins and stared through the night with blurred eyes.

A horseman emerged from the darkness and thundered toward him. George's horse pranced nervously and the boy tightened the reins.

The galloping figure dashed past him and through the open gate and continued on away from the ranch with undiminished speed.

George caught only a fleeting glimpse of the rider in the faint moonlight, but that single glimpse was enough. He saw a bulky figure and red whiskers and a single eye that glared at him menacingly as it sped past. He saw enough to swear it was Ezra who had killed his mother after he rode on up to the house and found her body lying in her blood-soaked bed.

When his testimony was added to that of Ethan Junior and of Jose it was quite enough to convince the strongest doubters that Ezra was the victim of a homicidal mania that had taken four lives in the span of a few hours.

CHAPTER X

PAT STEVENS hestiated briefly after walking out from Sally to his saddled horse. The gray had been ridden to Dutch Springs and back, and Pat decided it might be a good idea to change him for a fresher horse. He didn't know how far he'd be riding, nor how fast. His plans were vague but he knew he likely wouldn't be back to the Lazy Mare before matters were definitely settled with Eustis Harlow.

Pat let the fresh dun out into an easy lope and headed due south across the range. His ranch stretched a dozen miles to the south from headquarters, with one corner of it touching the Spangler ranch that Ezra had bought recently. From that corner it was another two miles to the closest boundary fence of the VX.

It was well past midnight: somewhere around about one-thirty, Pat figured, after squinting up at the moon and stars.

Pat used up an hour covering that first twelve miles, holding his mount down to a steady pace that left plenty of strength in reserve for the riding

that would be required after the Lazy Mare boundary was reached. When he was less than a mile from the corner, Pat slowed to a dog-trot while he searched through the velvety moonlight for signs of Lazy Mare cattle ahead.

There was a little coulee near the corner that was rich in grass, and he thought he might find a bunch bedded down there. As he neared the coulee he decided he had better drive a few of those along to the fence-line and not take a chance on finding others closer. It would slow him up a little, but it would save time in the end if there weren't any others closer and he had to ride back to the coulee.

His hunch was right. There were ten or twelve two-year-old heifers sleeping in the lush grass, and they lifted their heads and stared at him in mild surprise when he checked his horse in front of them. They were well-fed and tame, and he had some difficulty rousing them and cutting out half a dozen to drive toward the fence corner.

There was a gate in the wire fence at the corner, and Pat circled ahead just before they got there, rode his dun close to lean from the saddle and lift the wire loop holding the gate-stave tight to a post. He threw the gate open and loped back before the heifers had made up their minds to scatter, pushed them through the gate and closed it behind them, then continued the drive in a straight line for the VX fence-like two miles ahead.

THE stars were beginning to pale in the sky overhead and the moon was sinking low toward the horizon when he reached his destination. He knew it must be nearly three o'clock, not long before day would break in the east.

There wasn't any gate in the VX fence where he hit it. Pat dismounted and got wire-cutters from his saddlebag, cut the three barbed strands without the slightest compunction. This was one of the worst crimes possible in the cattle country, but Pat had his own reasons for doing it.

He drove the six fat heifers bearing his brand through the gap in the cut fence, and then choused them on toward the VX headquarters. He stirred up other VX cattle along the way and got his heifers intermingled with a small herd, and turned back after driving them more than a mile from the gap.

He galloped back and rode through it into Ezra's pasture just as the first streaks of red were coloring the eastern sky. It was less than a mile to the slab house that Ezra hd been fixing up to move into, and it would really come light enough to allow the work Pat hoped to get done.

He knew Ezra had been laying in some supplies at the house, and cooking his own midday meals there, so he turned his dun in that direction with the thought that he could boil up a pot of coffee at least while he waited for day to come. He left the cut wires of the fence down behind him.

The old Spangler house was set back on the edge of a draw underneath four aged cottonwood trees. It was built of untrimmed pine slabs chinked up with clay and moss. A decrepit windmill creaked lazily in front of the house pumping a small stream of water that overflowed from the watering trough Ezra had recently repaired.

Pat stopped his dun at the trough for a long drink, and then rode up to the side of the house and tied the reins to a cottonwood sapling. It was still quite dark and he fumbled his way around to the back door and found it unlocked. He struck a match as he went in the kitchen and looked around for a lamp or candle. A wooden box of groceries stood in the middle of the floor, and there was a coffeepot and frying pan on the old wood stove, but Pat didn't see anything to make a light with.

AS THE match burned out in his fingers he remembered that Ezra hadn't started staying here at night yet, so there wasn't any good reason why there would be a lamp in the house.

He struck another match and went over to the stove, found a neat box of kindling with wadded up newspapers to start a fire with.

He laid a fire in the darkness and put flame to it, then hoisted the coffeepot from the back of the stove and

grimaced when its weight told him it was half-full of stale coffee and used grounds.

He had expected it to be that way, of course. That's the way Ezra kept house. He used a big pot and started out fresh about once a week with a clean pot and a few handfuls of coffee in the bottom along with a few cups of water. Ezra didn't believe in wasting the grounds after each pot of coffee. After drinking all he wanted, he set the pot back on the range, and the next time he wanted coffee he simply added a handful of coffee to the old grounds and poured more water and brought it to a boil. He kept this up until the pot was so full of grounds there wasn't room for any more water, then he dumped it out and started over. By the feel of the pot, Pat knew it held a collection of grounds that had been accumulating for several days.

He blundered across the dark kitchen to the door, went out and emptied the pot on the ground, carried it around to the horse trough where he rinsed it out and filled it about half full of fresh water from the trough.

He grinned to himself as he thought what Sally would say if she could see him doing it. She had some fool notion that water from a horse trough wasn't sanitary enough for cooking. Just as if boiling it wouldn't kill all the germs. But all women were sort of finicky about things like that.

He carried the pot back to the stove where his kindling fire was beginning to roar, set it on to heat and replenished the fire box with bigger pieces of wood. He struck another match and rummaged around on the shelves until he found Ezra's coffee sack, poured a sufficient amount in the pot to make a brew strong enough to float an egg, then found a broken-backed chair and settled back comfortably against the wall to smoke a cigarette while he waited for the pot to boil.

He wished Ezra was with him He hated to think about the big, one-eyed red-head being cooped up in jail. Ezra was funny about jails. He'd been locked up in plenty of them in his time, but he never had got used to the idea. It sort of gave him a smothery feeling to be locked up, he said, and he got mighty restless after a few hours.

Pat tried not to think about the way Ezra had looked at him in the Gold Eagle when he turned him over to Tripo. Like Ezra figured the end of the world had come. Like he'd lost his last friend in the world. More curious than angry. Sort of like he pitied Pat instead of hating him.

Still even now, Pat didn't see how he could have done differently. There wasn't any doubt that Ezra was safer locked up in jail for a few days than anywhere else. If Sam and he would have just listened to reason in the back room of the Gold Eagle Pat would have explained what he planned to do. But they were a couple of hotheads who thought they could whip the world with one gun and a pair of fists. After all the scrapes Pat had got them out of, they still hadn't learned that sometimes more could be accomplished by guile than by brute force.

WELL, he hoped he had fooled Harlow as he had Sam and Ezra. All he needed right now was a little time. If he was lucky, as soon as it came daylight and he was able to locate the VX critters mixed in with Ezra's stuff and get them back into their own pasture before any one saw him, he would have Ezra out of jail quick enough. For Pat didn't have any doubt that there were some of the VX cows in Ezra's herd, as Harlow claimed. Harlow was too smart to make such an accusation without the proof to back him up. He would have seen to it that the cows were there before he had Ezra arrested.

Still, it was a kind of foolish charge to make against a man like Ezra. Everybody in the Valley knew he wouldn't rustle a neighbor's stock. Harlow must know he couldn't hold him in jail very long on a trumped-up charge like that. It didn't make good sense. Pat couldn't see what Harlow hoped to gain by it.

That had bothered him all night. He didn't think Harlow was foolish enough to hope Ezra would ever be convicted. Not even if a few of his cows were found in Ezra's possession.

No jury of Powder Valley ranchers would ever believe Ezra guilty. They would think the cows had strayed if they didn't go so far as to suspect Harlow had put them in Ezra's pasture to frame him.

Harlow must know that, Pat thought. He wasn't a fool. He knew Ezra's reputation for honesty in the Valley.

Then, why had he gone to the farce of arresting Ezra?

That question kept pounding at Pat, and he couldn't find any satisfactory answer to it. He didn't make the mistake of underestimating Eustis Harlow. He was pretty sure the wily Texan had some other trick up his sleeve, but for the life of him Pat couldn't figure what it might be.

The coffee boiled over and spattered loudly on the hot stove. Pat jumped up and hurried over to pull it back where it would simmer gently. He heard a horse coming up to the front of the house, and he stood still and listened with a deep frown on his face. It was almost dawn now plenty light enough to distinguish objects outside the kitchen window.

Pat heard the horse stop right outside, and heard a rider dismounting. His own horse was tethered at the side of the house out of sight. He loosened his guns in their holsters and moved silently to the door leading out from the kitchen.

He stood there waiting with his hands on the butts of his guns, listening to slow, solid footsteps approaching the front door.

The front door opened and a bulky figure was outlined against the red glow of dawn in the sky.

Pat saw red whiskers and a single eye peering inside at him in the darkness, and he called out harshly:

"Ezra! How'd you get out of jail? You danged fool. . . "

His hands fell away from his guns as he spoke, and he took a long stride forward.

A gun streaked a lance of flame at him from the doorway. Pat felt an impact in his left shoulder as though a heavy club had struck him there. It twisted him sideways and he went down.

He lay there and cursed angrily, "Ezra! It's me. Pat. Don't you hear me? Don't you know. . . "

The big, whiskered man was striding toward him wordlessly. He bent over Pat and struck him a savage blow on the back of his head with the barrel of his sixgun. Pat sunk into a soft pit of blackness and didn't know any more.

CHAPTER XI

SALLY was setting breakfast on the table when Pete and the other two hands came in from the bunkhouse. Pete said, "Good mornin', Miz Stevens," and looked at the table with only five places set.

Sally saw his glance, and she explained quickly, "Pat isn't here. . . and I guess you know about Ezra."

"Yes'm," Pete said solemnly. "We know all about Ezra. But I didn't know you did." He cleared his throat and pulled out a chair to sit down.

"Oh yes," said Sally calmly. "Pat told me all about it." She looked at Pete levelly with her chin lifted, as though she challenged him to say something about the way Pat had handled the situation in Dutch Springs.

To her surprise, Pete said admiringly, "Pat done awright, shore enuff. Did him an' Ezra ride by this way?"

"Pat was alone. Don't you know Ezra is in jail?"

Dock came in just then. He stopped stock-still and stared at his mother and said, "In jail? Ezra? Howcome?"

"But he ain't," Pete put in. "Not no more, I mean. I reckon maybe you don't know all of it, Ma'm," he went on gravely to Sally. "Pat musta rode out here in a hurry to get his guns. We wondered how he pulled off a jailbreak without 'em."

Sally bit her lip and sat down suddenly. "A . . . jail-break?"

"Yes'm. I reckon he didn't tell you what he planned on, but shucks, it ain't no secret now. I reckon ever'-

body in the Valley knows how Pat outsmarted Harlow by turnin' Ezra over for jailin' an' then slippin' back an' gettin' him out after Harlow an' his new sheriff had rode off jest leaving two men to guard Ezra."

"Pat did that?" gasped Sally. "He went in and helped Ezra break out?"

"He shore did," Pete assured her with a wide grin. "Flabbergasted us, I kin tell you. We thought we was bein' smart when Sam Sloan an' Boyd an' Mr. Winters got all gunned up an' went after Ezra. Found him awready gone an' the two deputies tied up an' maddern' wet hens."

"Are you sure it was Pat?" Sally demanded.

"I don't reckon nobody's gonna say so out loud in company. He wore a mask an' can't nobody prove 'twas him. But I don't know another man in the hull Valley that'd have the guts to do it single-handed."

"Gee whiz, nobody tells me nothing," groaned Dock. "What happened, Pete? About Ezra gettin' arrested and dad breaking him out of jail? How could *dad?* He's the sheriff. What deputies did he leave there guardin' Ezra?"

Pete glanced at Sally doubtfully. She sighed and nodded. "Go ahead and tell him all about it, Pete. He'll worry the life out of me until he does find out, and it isn't anything for him to be ashamed of."

"It shore ain't," agreed Pete warmly. "Jest another time when Pat Stevens proved he was smarter'n all the rest of us put together." He took a big gulp of hot coffee and folded a slice of ham into a buttered biscuit and told the entire tale to the excited boy across the table from him.

"I wonder where Pat took Ezra." Sally mused when Pete had finished. "He didn't tell me anything about what he was planning to do when he rode away last night."

"He didn't want you to worry," Pete guessed. "I reckon he hid Ezra out till things quiet down. Don't you worry about *them* two."

IT WAS nearly noon and Sally was out in the yard feeding cracked corn to her hens when she saw a deputation of armed men approaching the ranch house. Her heart came up into her throat for a moment because she thought it must be Harlow's men looking for Pat to arrest him for last night's jail-break, but her fears subsided when she recognized the men.

There were only four of them, all ranchers whom she knew well, solid and respected citizens of the Valley. Mr. Simpson and Nate Turner were in the lead, and behind them rode young Pike Gilroy and Arnold Potter.

She tossed the rest of the corn to the clucking hens and walked to meet them, tilting her sunbonneted head and smiling to let them all see she wasn't worried about Pat.

Nat Turner reined his horse up and lifted his hat to Sally. His grizzled face was very grave. "Mawnin', Miz Stevens," he greeted her. "Pat roundabout anywheres?"

"No, he isn't." Sally clasped her hands in front of her and waited. All four men were heavily armed and looked unwontedly serious. She thought things must have come to some sort of a showdown between Eustis Harlow and the other element in the Valley and that these men were seeking Pat for leadership in this new crisis as they always had in the past.

"I reckon Ezra's not here either?" Turner asked.

"No."

"We're wonderin' if you know anything about Pat breakin' Ezra outta jail last night?"

"Why, yes," Sally said gladly. "Wasn't it wonderful the way he worked it? He came home for his guns first, and I haven't seen either of them since. But I'm not worried about them. I know those two can always take care of themselves."

"Nobody knowed for sure it was Pat that got him out," Nate Turner explained carefully while the others sat on their horses and listened and watched her.

"Who else did you think would have the nerve to do a thing like that?" Sally demanded proudly.

Turner shifted in the saddle and glanced back uneasily at the others. He muttered, "Yes'm, that's the way

it looked to us too, but it seemed like a good idea to make sure an' not go off half-cocked."

"What are you talking about?" Sally's voice became sharp. "You act like you blame Pat for doing it? What else did you *expect* him to do? Leave Ezra in jail? Did you think he would really knuckle down to a man like Mr. Harlow?"

"Well, no'm. I reckon that was mighty like Pat Stevens awright. But it sure makes things mighty danged bad. . . "

"What *are* you talking about?" Sally interrupted him fiercely. "Why does it make things bad? Do you think it would have been better if Pat let Ezra rot in jail?"

"Would've been better for Ethan and Nancy Page, and Jake Munort, and Miz Kincaid," Pike Gilroy blurted out bitterly from his saddle behind Nate Turner.

Sally closed her eyes for a moment. She didn't know what he meant. She opened them slowly and echoed in complete bewilderment, "The Pages and Jake Munort and Mrs Kincaid? What have *they* got to do with all of this?"

"Plenty," said Turner heavily. "We hate like thunder to tell you, Miz Stevens, but I reckon you better hear it from Pat's friends than from someone else. It sure looks like Ezra done went plumb crazy an' murdered all four of 'em in cold blood last night after Pat turned him loose from jail."

SALLY reeled back from the shocking impact of his words. She said, "Oh no!" and put both hands up to her face. "Not Ezra!" she cried out. "There's some terrible mistake. There *must* be."

"I'm afraid there ain't," said Turner grimly. "There's witnesses to every one of the killin's. I ain't sayin' anybody would believe the six-year-old Page boy, nor mebby yet Jose that heard ol' Jake sayin' it was Ezra while he was dying; but there's the Kincaid boy too. He seen Ezra just like the rest of 'em. Add 'em all three together and they spell out Ezra sure as yo're alive."

"They *saw* Ezra do it?"

"That's right."

"But where was Pat when it happened? Even if Ezra went crazy somehow, *what was Pat doing?*"

"That's what we was hopin' you could tell us, Ma'm." Nate Turner's voice was suddenly very gentle.

"You don't think he. . . nobody thinks *Pat* was there or had anything to do with it?" Sally cried hysterically.

"He turned Ezra out of jail," said Arnold Potter grimly. "Seems like that sorta makes him responsible along with Ezra."

"You see, Ma'm," said Turner apologetically, "All of us know Ezra ain't none too bright. I reckon there's a lot of folks been thinking he might go off like this some day, but we all sorta trusted Pat to hold him down. They was such good friends an' all."

"We're wastin' time here," put in Pike Gilroy angrily. "We got to locate Ezra 'fore he sneaks up behind somebody else an' kills 'em."

Turner said gruffly, "We're mighty sorry, Miz Stevens. If Pat was to find Ezra an' put him outta the way first I reckon it'd be best all the way 'round. That'd sorta keep folks from blaming him so much." He wheeled his horse about and the four men galloped away.

Sally stood very still with the sun in her face and watched them go. She was too numbed by the terrible news to really understand its full import. She only knew that Pat was in dreadful trouble and that she could do nothing to help him. Nothing.

CHAPTER XII

EZRA had a huge sledge-hammer and was swinging it in mighty blows above his head, bringing it crashingly down upon Pat's skull. He was bared to the waist and sweat dripped off his huge torso as he swung the hammer mightily. His scarred, red-whiskered face was split in a mighty grin and he laughed resoundingly each time he swung the heavy sledge downward.

Pat was lying on his back watching him with awed fascination. He tried to close his eyes each time he saw the hammer coming down, but his eyelids seemed to be held open as

though by some mechanical device. It was horrible to lie there and watch Ezra swing the sledge above his head, and he wondered vaguely why the force of the blows didn't smash his head wide open instead of just bouncing off each time.

Another and more insistent pounding drew his attention away from Ezra. It was on the side of his head just behind his right ear. He rolled his eyes in that direction and saw Sam Sloan kneeling beside him with a cold chisel and a small carpenter's hammer. Sam's face was gravely expressionless as he worked. He seemed intent on chiseling away a portion of Pat's head and he refused to meet the eyes of his old friend as he pounded away.

It was a hell of a way for Sam and Ezra to be treating him, Pat thought angrily. He tried to yell at Sam to let up, but no sound came out of his mouth when he opened it. He had a funny feeling, like he was already dead. But it wouldn't hurt if he was dead. So he must still be alive. But he couldn't close his eyes and he couldn't move any portion of his body, and both his old friends pounded away as though they didn't know he could feel it.

This kept on for a long time. Ezra stood on widespread feet and swung his heavy weapon in a slow, relentless rhythm. Each time it bounced off Pat's head, Ezra caught it on the back swing and brought it up and over his head and down again with a ferocious grunt, and then he laughed exultantly.

At the same time Sam's cold chisel was getting blunted on Pat's hard skull. Sam kept right on pounding just as hard as ever, but a worried frown was beginning to show on his face. Pat wanted to tell him to get a sharper chisel. It seemed to him it would be a blessed relief if the chisel would just go on through the bone into his brain and finish him off. But he had a funny idea that this was going to keep up forever, that it would never stop and there wasn't anything he could do about it.

Then Pat came back to consciousness. He opened his eyes wide, and the figures of Sam and Ezra vanished. He was lying on his back and a streak of bright sunlight struck him full in the face. The pounding kept right on, but now it was on the inside of his head. His hair was matted down to the floor in a pool of dried blood, and when he tried to move he found it was stuck fast.

IT ALL came back to him now, though his mind refused to accept the memory. Something was wrong. He thought he must be crazy. Hell! The way he remembered it, Ezra had ridden up and come in the door. And when Pat called to him, the one-eyed man up and shot him. And then strode forward and whacked Pat over the head while he lay on the floor.

That couldn't be right. Ezra was in the Dutch Springs jail. And if he wasn't in jail, he wouldn't have shot Pat like that, no matter how mad he was.

There had to be something wrong with his memory. It seemed to Pat it was all sort of mixed up with the dream he'd been having about Ezra and Sam pounding him on the head with a sledge-hammer and cold chisel.

He tried to move his left hand, and a streak of pain darted through his left shoulder. He lifted his right hand cautiously and tugged at the strands of hair that were stuck to the floor. When he got them loose, he pulled himself up to a sitting position and opened his eyes again.

He was weak and dizzy. The pounding inside his head got worse when he sat up. He waited for it to subside a little, then reached up and warily explored the bullet wound in his shoulder. It was on the outside, through the bunched muscles and flesh, but it didn't feel like the bone was injured.

He twisted sideways and lifted himself to his feet with the support of his right hand. His knees were wobbly, and he traversed an unsteady and wavering path to the front door and out to the water trough.

The sun was overhead, a little in the west. Past noon already, by golly. He had been lying on the floor unconscious more than half a day.

He sank to his knees by the wooden

trough and buried his face and head in the sun-warmed water. It revived him and made the pain worse. He rocked back on his heels and stripped the bloody shirt from his wounded shoulder, used the torn sleeve as a sponge to wash away the clotted blood. The bullet had torn a clean hole through the outside part of his arm, and he left the clotted blood at both ends of the hole so it wouldn't start bleeding again.

He got up to his feet and staggered back to the house. His saddled horse was still patiently standing where he had tied him by the side of the house six or seven hours previously.

The most important thing right now, Pat decided, was to assure himself that Ezra had been in jail this morning when he was attacked. As soon as he was sure of that, he thought he might be able to forget that crazy memory of being attacked by Ezra and that the truth of it might come to him. But he had to know first. The memory was too strong to be downed any other way.

He used his torn shirt sleeve to make a rude sling for his wounded arm, and then went out to his horse. He was weak and dizzy from the loss of blood and he managed to climb into the saddle with difficulty, but once his feet were firmly planted in the stirrups he was all right again.

He rode the dun around to the trough and let him drink his belly full of water, then turned him in a northwesterly direction toward the Pony Express way station where Sam Sloan and his wife lived.

IT WAS only about fifteen miles to the express station, and Pat felt a desperate need to talk to Sam. He knew Sam must have waited in Dutch Springs to ride the morning mail south, and Sam would know for sure about Ezra still being in jail. Of course, Pat knew Ezra *must* be in jail. He just had to be. Pat knew he'd have a hard time hanging onto his reason if he didn't *know* it couldn't have been Ezra who attacked him that morning.

There was only one fear that nagged at Pat Stevens as he rode toward Sam's shack on the road south from Dutch Springs. He knew it was something he had subconsciously been fearing ever since he came back to consciousness after being knocked out. *He was afraid Sam had taken matters in his own hands last night and managed to get Ezra out of jail.*

He tried to avoid thinking about that possibility. He clung desperately to his belief that Ezra was in jail and thus could not have attacked him. If Sam had got hot-headed and helped Ezra break jail. . .

Pat didn't want to think about that. He kept remembering the way Ezra had looked at him last night when he turned him over to Tripo. Ezra was sort of funny. He was childish sometimes, in his sudden and terrible rages, and was capable of thoughtless violence on such occasions. It was hard for Pat to believe that Ezra's anger could ever actually be directed against him, but all the same he knew he'd be mighty uncomfortable about the whole thing right now if he didn't keep assuring himself that Ezra was safe in jail and *couldn't* have shot him that morning at dawn.

The sun was scorching hot and beat down pitilessly on the wounded rider and the plodding dun horse. Saddled and without food since midnight, the dun was willingly giving his best, but his best wasn't as good as it had been the preceding night.

It was almost three hours after Pat awoke on the floor of Ezra's ranch house when the low cluster of buildings that was the express way station began to take form before Pat's blurred eyes. The dun pricked his ears and lengthened his stride, and Pat gave him his head, knowing there were fresh saddle horses at the station that he could borrow if there was more riding that had to be done immediately.

He was weaving in the saddle and clutching the saddle-horn tightly with his uninjured hand when he rode into the yard in front of the shack that Sam and Kitty Sloan called home.

He grinned weakly when the door slammed open and Sam came striding

out. He dropped the reins and slid down to the ground wearily and relaxed against Sam who put his arm about him and cursed in a low monotone as he noted his condition.

PAT let Sam lead him inside the three-room shack and didn't try to do any talking. He sank down on a pile of buffalo robes in one corner, and muttered, "Water," and then closed his eyes and let his body soak in the coolness of the room.

Sam brought him a cup of cool water and Pat drank it gratefully. Then he said, "Take care of my hawse, Sam. He ain't been unsaddled since midnight."

"What happened to you?" Sam demanded roughly. "Where in hell have yuh been an' who did yuh tangle with?"

Pat waved his hand and tried to grin. "Never mind me. Take care of the dun an' then we'll talk."

Sam nodded and hurried out. He knew Pat would never be satisfied until his horse was looked after, and that arguing about it would only put off explanations that much longer.

Pat was sitting up smoking a cigarette when Sam came back. He had regained his ruddy color and looked all right except for the bloody shoulder.

He shook his head and winced when Sam offered to examine the wound. "Leave it be like it is. You know a bullet hole heals quicker if you leave it alone."

"Shore. It's jest through thuh flesh part," Sam agreed. "Who threw lead at yuh?"

"That's the funny thing," Pat muttered cautiously. "I don't rightly know. Whoever 'twas banged me on the head an' went off an' left me." He paused and blew out a spiral of blue smoke. "I hope yo're not sore about last night."

Sam shook his head and laughed contentedly. "You were right an' I was wrong. Dang it, I reckon I had oughtta thank you fer takin' my gun an' keepin' me an' Ezra from bein' a couple of plumb fools. You allus do think three jumps ahead of us. If I'd knowed what you was plannin' to do I woulda he'ped you."

"You shoulda guessed," Pat muttered.

"Shore. I know. But I got all riled up an' didn't stop to think. Soon's I found out, I was sorry you had to do it all alone."

"That's all right," said Pat awkwardly. There was a short silence. Then he asked, "How did you find out?"

"What?" Sam looked at him in surprise.

"What I was gonna do?"

Sam laughed and slapped his thigh. "'Cause you beat me to it. That's how. Me an' John Boyd an' Winters, an' Pete an' yore other two hands. After I come to an' we talked things over in the back room there didn't none of us have sense enuff to figger you'd already be ahead of us, so we started out tuh do the same thing."

Pat frowned and shook his head worriedly. Sam's words didn't seem to make much sense. He wondered if the blow on his head had plumb addled his brain. Seemed like he couldn't think straight any more. First, there was his crazy idea that Ezra had shot him and knocked him out; and now Sam's talk didn't make sense. He said, "I didn't see nothing of you-all."

"Shore you didn't," Sam agreed cheerfully. "You an' Ezra had done pulled out 'fore we got there."

"Me. . . an' Ezra?"

"Shore. Them two depyties of Tripo's was still tied up when we got to thuh jail."

"Tied up, huh?" Pat said slowly. His mind refused to accept what Sam was telling him.

"Where'd you take Ezra?" Sam demanded. "What in hell's happened since you busted him loose outta jail? Is he awright?"

"I guess. . .*he's* all right."

"Where is he at? Did you-all run into Tripo an' swap lead with him? Fer gosh sake's, Pat, tell me what's up."

Pat said helplessly, "I don't rightly know." He looked down at his bloodied shoulder with a bemused expression. "I got this here out to Ezra's place."

Sam frowned. "That ain't a very

good hideout. Fust place Tripo'd look fer him, I reckon. How-come you went there?"

Pat hesitated. He asked abruptly, "Anybody see Ezra breakin' jail?"

"Nobody but the depyties."

"Did they say 'twas me that helped him?"

"They didn't rekernize yuh with that mask over yore face," chuckled Sam. "But I reckon ever-body in Powder Valley knows it wasn't nobody else 'ceptin' you that coulda done it."

Pat puffed on his cigarette thoughtfully. He was plumb flabbergasted by Sam's disclosures. *Someone* had rescued Ezra from jail last night. Some unidentified man wearing a mask whom everyone thought was Pat Stevens.

That meant Ezra was loose somewhere at the time Pat was attacked at his ranch. Could it be possible he hadn't dreamt that stuff about Ezra returning and attacking him? It was fantastic. It couldn't be true. He felt a cold sweat break out all over his body.

HE STARTED to speak, but stopped when he heard the sound of a galloping horse pulling up outside. Sam went to the door and Pat heard him say, "Hi-yuh Oscar. Mighty hot day tuh be pushin' a hawse that-away."

And he heard Oscar Penrose's voice reply, "I'm carrying the news to all the ranchers to spread out an' start huntin' Ezra an' Pat Stevens."

"Ezra an' Pat Stevens?" Sam Sloan echoed with angry incredulity. "You mean our friends are turnin' ag'in 'em?"

"They got plenty of reason," Oscar Penrose said harshly. "Ezra's done gone crazy and started murdering folks right an' left. Ethan and Nancy Page. Old Jake Munort, an' Miz Kincaid."

"What kinda talk is that?" Sam ejaculated.

"It's true talk, Sam. The little Page boy saw Ezra shoot his paw an' maw. He described Ezra to a T. Red whiskers, one eye, scar an' all. Kid like that wouldn't have no reason for lying. And Jake told Mexican Jose it was Ezra just before he keeled over an' died. Then George Kincaid near got run over by Ezra runnin' off after killin' his mother while she was asleep in her bed. I tell you, Sam, I ain't never seen the folks in Powder Valley so killin' mad. They're huntin' Ezra to shoot him down like a locoed coyote on sight."

"Where was Pat when all this here was takin' place?" demanded Sam with dangerous calm.

"Nobody don't know. Folks is mostly feared Ezra went crazy an' killed him fust at the beginnin' of the rampage. Lot of 'em thought maybe 'twasn't Pat that turned him outta jail, but Miz Stevens, she says 'twas, all right. Shore is a bad mess. You better have a gun handy case he turns up here."

"Yeh," said Sam. "I shore am obliged, Oscar. Mebby you better be ridin' on now."

"You betcha. So long and watch out."

Pat sat very still and listened to the thunder of departing hoofs down the road southward.

Sam Sloan came back through the door. Pat could't see his face in the shadowed interior of the way station. But he stopped stiffly just inside the door and stood there looking at Pat.

"I reckon you heard what Oscar said?"

"I heard every word of it," Pat admitted.

"We've done lotsa things together, us three," Sam said slowly. He sounded bewildered. As though he was groping for words. "We bin in plenty of trouble an' ailus got out of it by stickin' together?" He sounded as though he asked a question.

Pat said, "That's right, Sam."

"We've done some killin'," Sam went on in the same tone. "All of us has. But it ain't never bin shootin' old ladies in their sleep." His voice became labored and pleading, "Tell me it ain't true, Pat. Tell me there ain't no word of it true. Not Ezra! He couldn't do them things."

Pat sighed deeply. He said, "I wish I could tell you, Sam."

"You mean. . .you cain't? He did it? After you turned him outta jail?"

"I don't know." Pat paused, then

added simply, "I didn't turn him out of jail."

Sam murmured, "Lord in heaven," and sat down suddenly.

CHAPTER XIII

THERE was a long heavy silence in the room between the two old friends. Sam's breathing became labored. When he finally spoke his voice was harsh and rasping, "Say that over ag'in, Pat. Seems like I didn't hear you very good."

"I didn't have anything to do with getting Ezra out of jail last night," Pat repeated quietly. "I didn't know anything about it till just now. I thought he was still locked up."

"Who did it then? Who tied up the depyties an' busted Ezra out?"

"I don't know," groaned Pat. "I don't know nothin' about it. I rode straight home from the Gold Eagle."

"Then how-come Sally is tellin' folks you done it?"

"I don't know that either," Pat admitted. "I slipped in to get my guns an' she woke up and I had to tell her the whole story. An' I said I was ridin' out to do what I could to get Ezra out of his trouble, so maybe she thought I meant I was goin' in to hold up the jailhouse."

"Yeh. An' then when she heard he was turned loose by a masked man 'bout yore size, she decided it musta been you that did it." Sam assented lugubriously.

"Who could of done it, Sam?"

"I shore dunno. I dunno nothin' no more. 'Cept that Ezra couldn't of done them things they say. Not ol' Ezra!"

Pat Stevens didn't reply. His shoulder pained him and his head was throbbing anew.

"I don't care who claims they seen him," Sam went on resolutely. "That Page boy ain't more'n six years old. An' Jake Munort's Mex hand don't understand English so good. He probably got mixed up in what Jake said while he was dyin'."

"How about George Kincaid?" Pat demanded. "He's old enough to know what he sees, an' he ain't just repeatin' what somebody else told him. Not according to Oscar Penrose."

"George was drunker'n a hoot owl last night," Sam said disgustedly. "I don't reckon he knows what-all he saw. Look here, Pat," he went on fiercely. "You ain't believing it? You ain't takin' sides ag'in Ezra?"

Pat hesitated. He lowered his voice and asked, "Where's Kitty?"

"In thuh bedroom yonder." Sam nodded toward a closed door. "She wasn't feelin' so good when I rode in from Dutch Springs this mornin', an' she's bin layin' down. Asleep, I reckon."

"Not feelin' so good?" Pat's voice was instantly worried. "You don't reckon. . .it ain't her time yet, is it?"

"Fer thuh baby? Naw." Sam sounded very sure about it, as though he had been a father many times and knew all the ropes perfectly. "Doc Trimble was out tuh see her las' week an' he said 'twould be a couple more weeks yet most likely. He said not tuh worry none till she started, you know, to hurtin' bad."

Pat said, "Yeh. I know. I hope doc's right. Was he sober when he looked at her?"

"Purty nigh," Sam said cautiously.

"I just didn't want her to hear any of this," Pat explained, "because what I'm going to tell you is somethin' you an' me can't tell nobody. Not till we know the straight of ever'thing anyhow." He paused and drew in a long breath. "I've seen him, Sam."

"Who?"

"Ezra."

"The hell yuh say! When? Where is he at?"

"Wait a minute," protested Pat. "I didn't say nothin' before because I wasn't rightly shore. I hoped 'twas a sort of dream. I thought Ezra was locked up safe in jail an' it *couldn't* of been him. Hold tight to yore chair, Sam. You're not goin' to like this a-tall. It was Ezra that done this to me. . .or else he's got a twin brother runnin' around shooting people," he added darkly.

"You mean ol' Ezra shot *you* up?"

"THAT'S what I mean." Pat sighed deeply and went on to explain, "When I turned Ezra over to Tripo last night I figured on quietin' things down to give me a

chance to fix things up a little. I knew if there was VX cows in Ezra's pasture they'd been put there by Harlow to cause trouble, so I headed that way an' messed things up a little more by drivin' some of my stuff into Harlow's place. And I left a gap cut in the fence between the VX an' Ezra's ranch so if we had to we could claim the VX cows had drifted through the gap without Ezra knowin' they were there."

"That was good figgerin'," Sam approved.

"But I thought it'd be better yet if I could fix it to get the VX stuff back where they belonged," Pat explained, "an' I was going to wait till daylight an' try to cut 'em out. So I rode to Ezra's new ranch house and boiled me up a pot of coffee while I waited for it to get light. Now, here's what happened near as I can make it out straight in my head."

He went on to graphically tell about hearing the rider came up, how he recognized Ezra in the doorway and called to him just before the shot was fired.

"I went down to the floor," he related, "an' got knocked in the head and I passed out. I stayed out cold till past noon, an' when I come to I wasn't sure how much was real an' how much I'd sort of dreamed up. I headed over here to see you an' get you to tell me Ezra was in jail an' I *must* of dreamed it 'bout him. Instead of that, you tell me he broke out of jail last night. Then Oscar comes along an' he tells us all this other stuff." Pat waved his uninjured hand helplessly in the air.

"I don't believe it," said Sam flatly. "not none of it. An' you don't believe it neither, Pat. You an' me know Ezra wouldn't do them things. It's a damn lie."

"Not if he was in his right mind, he wouldn't," Pat agreed.

"*We've* got to believe in him," said Sam fiercely. "The hull rest of thuh Valley has turned ag'in him an' you an' me are the only ones left."

"I'm all mixed up in my head," Pat confessed miserably. "I have been ever since I come to. Seems like I can't think straight. Of course, I *know* it wasn't Ezra," he went on more strongly. "Even if I did see him with my own eyes. Must of been the devil himself fixed up to look like Ezra just to make more trouble here in the Valley."

The voice of a woman came weakly from the closed door of the bedroom. It was Kitty Sloan calling, "Sam! Come here, Sam." Her voice held a high-pitched note of fright that startled the two men.

Sam jumped to his feet and muttered, "I better see," to Pat, and hurried to the door. He went in and closed it behind him.

PAT settled back on the pile of buffalo hides and made himself another cigarette. Resting easily in the rude sling, his left arm was feeling better and he found he could use the fingers of his injured hand as long as he held the shoulder still.

He forgot about Sam and Kitty in the other room as he concentrated on Ezra and the terrible accusation against him made by Oscar Penrose. Sam was right. He and Sam *had* to believe in Ezra. They were his friends. They knew he couldn't be guilty of the atrocities charged against him. They were his only close friends. That was the trouble. Other people didn't know him as they did. Terribly conscious of the disfiguring ugliness of his scarred face and one eye, Ezra had always shunned intimate contact with people. He was always afraid they pitied him, and he didn't want to be pitied. This gave him the reputation of being queer; and only Pat Stevens and Sam Sloan knew the true greatness of the big man's heart.

It was a shock to Pat to realize these things suddenly. He had never thought much about how other people regarded Ezra, but now he saw it was terribly important. Not knowing the big man as he and Sam did, they were quick to think the worst of him, and now mob violence was about to result.

He looked up quickly as the door from the bedroom opened. Sam came out and closed it behind him. He stood with his back against the door and looked at Pat. In the shadowed room his dark face looked tired and

drawn, as though he was tormented by indecision and fear.

He said, "Kitty," and then paused and wet his lips. "She's. . .Pat, she thinks I oughtta get Doc Trimble in a hurry."

Pat sat erect. "You mean. . .she thinks the baby's comin'?"

Sam nodded miserably. "I'm scairt," he admitted hoarsely. "She. . .she's hurtin' somethin' awful, Pat. I don't see how I kin leave her. D'yuh think you could mebby make it tuh ride in an' get the doc?"

Pat got to his feet, his face set in lines of stern decision. "Get a roarin' fire going in the stove," he flung at Sam. "Bring in some buckets of water an' then you ride like hell for town. Roust out Doc Trimble an' bring him back here drunk or sober."

"C-couldn't you go?" stammered Sam. "Seems like I had ought to stay."

"What do you know about havin' babies?" Pat demanded scornfully. "I can help a little. I was there when Dock was born. Besides which, the way people feel about Ezra an' thinkin' it was me that turned him loose, they'd like as not shoot me or lock me up if I showed my face in town. Get that fire goin'."

HE WENT into Kitty's room and reported cheerfully, "Everything's under control, Ma'm. Sam's took off for the doctor like a scared rabbit and you can let go all you're a mind to now."

"Did you say Sam had gone?" she asked weakly.

Pat nodded and cleared his throat. "Nothin' to worry about with me on the job. I got scads of water heatin' on the stove, an'. . ." He vainly tried to think of something else that should be done, but that was as far as his sketchy knowledge went.

Kitty smiled and said, "I'm all right now."

Pat nodded wisely. "Shore. You just lay quiet and rest yorself."

"I wish you'd lift the shade, Pat."

He went to the window and lifted the shade. It was sundown and the first coolness of evening crept through the open window. When he turned back he saw Kitty regarding him fixedly. Her eyes were luminous and grave. "You've been hurt, haven't you?"

"Just a mite." Pat glanced down at his shoulder. "Not much more'n a scratch.'

"Ezra did it to you," Kitty's voice was a low, flat monotone. "And he's killed some other people, hasn't he? I heard Oscar telling Sam and then I heard you and Sam talking."

"You heard wrong," Pat told her. "Ezra ain't done nothing wrong. There's some bad mix-up, that's all."

Kitty moved her head restlessly on the pillow. It seemed to Pat that her eyes were becoming glassy. "I heard it all. I didn't tell Sam because I knew he didn't want me to be worried."

"I better see to the fire," Pat said hastily. He went into the kitchen, poked up the fire and put on more wood. The water in the dishpan was already boiling.

He tiptoed guiltily across the kitchen and opened a covered door to a shelf where Sam always kept a bottle of whisky. The pint bottle on the shelf was almost full.

Pat lifted it down and worried the cork out with his teeth. He tilted it up and let the whisky gurgle down his throat.

A wild, delirious scream rang out from Kitty's room. It held more hysteria and fright than of pain. She cried out, "No, no," and it was as though she was speaking to someone.

Pat dropped the whisky bottle onto the kitchen floor and lunged through the living room.

His hand instinctively went to his gun when he saw Kitty sitting upright in bed pointing a trembling finger at a man who was climbing through the open window into her room.

The man was Ezra. He was naked to the waist, and his face and torso were streaming with blood. His single eye gleamed madly and his mouth was wide open, emitting laborious wheezes.

Kitty was hysterical with fright, shrinking back away from him, and Pat's only thought was for her

He ran toward the window shouting

at Ezra to go back, and his gun was in his hand

Ezra didn't seem to hear him, or he paid no heed He pulled himself over the low window ledge and dropped on the floor on all fours like an animal.

Pat acted instinctively and without planning it out. He only knew he had to do something fast to reassure Kitty.

He swung his .45 in a short vicious arc and brought it down on the top of Ezra's head. It thudded dully against the red matted hair, and Ezra collapsed on the floor in an inert mass.

Pat turned and grabbed Kitty and forced her to lie down. "It's all right now. He won't bother you."

CHAPTER XIV

KITTY SLOAN sank back onto the bed sobbing weakly. Pat drew the covers up around her and hovered over her anxiously for a moment to be sure she had completely recovered from the awful fright brought on by Ezra's sudden appearance at her window. "Just take it easy, Kitty," he kept reassuring her. "Lie back an' take it easy. Don't worry about nothing. I'll stay right here and there can't be nothing happen to you."

"Ezra's face," she moaned. "That look in his eye when he started through the window. He's stark crazy, Pat. I thought about those other people he's killed. I didn't know where you were. I didn't know if you could get here in time." She drew in a great shuddering breath and twisted her head to look up into Pat's face. "Is he. . .did you. . .?"

"I knocked him out cold" Pat told her grimly. "I couldn't think what else to do with you so scared of him an' all. Not that I believe any of them things against Ezra" he went on with his face hardening. "I just couldn't stand to see you bein' scared at a time like this."

"But he *is* crazy Pat. He must be. Didn't you see the terrible look on his face?"

Pat shook his head stubbornly. "Funny things are happening," he admitted. "Things we don't know nothin' about. But nothin' could ever make me believe Ezra meant you any harm when he climbed in the window. Seemed to me like he maybe wasn't thinking just straight but that's all."

He leaned down by the side of the bed to examine the inert hulk of bloodied flesh lying there.

Ezra's single eye was closed and he was breathing slowly but regularly. Pat felt over the top of his head with practiced fingertips and observed with satisfaction that the barrel of his gun hadn't dented Ezra's hard skull. The big man's face was battered and there were bruises and abrasions all down his shoulders and back. None of the wounds appeared serious but it was evident he had lost a lot of blood.

Pat couldn't figure out what had caused all the small wounds. He looked like he had been fighting an army that had attacked him with knives and clubs. He wondered how Ezra had got there. He hadn't heard any horse approaching. He went to the window and peered out and was more puzzled than ever. There wasn't any saddled horse outside. It looked like Ezra had just sort of materialized out of nothing.

He frowned sharply as he leaned out the window. His ears caught a distant rumbling that was like the far-away roll of thunder. But it couldn't be thunder. The evening sky was clear of clouds.

It wasn't thunder. It was the drumming of many hoofs approaching across the level plain from the southwest. Must be twenty riders, Pat thought, though he still couldn't see them through the deepening twilight. And they were coming at a driving gallop that would bring them to the express station in a matter of minutes.

He understood now. Ezra had been fleeing for his life, instinctively turning to Sam Sloan for help. That explained the wild look on his face, his dive through the open window without waiting to go around to the door. He didn't know about Kitty, of course.

A CLOUD of dust was beginning to boil up from the plain, and

the pound of galloping hoofs was becoming plain now.

Pat drew back inside the room and pulled the window shade. He turned and met Kitty's eyes, knew that she heard the riders now and that she guessed what the sound portended.

"I reckon they're after Ezra," Pat told her harshly. "He came to Sam for help and they won't get him here. Let me handle it." He stopped and got his good hand under Ezra's shoulder, heaved and tugged and managed finally to roll the unconscious body underneath Kitty's bed.

The labor pains were beginning to come back on her when he straightened up again. He nodded approvingly and said, "Don't hold back. I'm going to bluff 'em and you've got to help. They won't come in where a woman's about to have a baby. I'll go out an' tell 'em, and you back me up by yelling some. You've got to help, Kitty. Sam would want it that way."

Kitty nodded and said through clenched teeth, "I know. I'll do whatever you want. Don't worry about me."

"An' don't worry about nothin'." Pat threw a hurried look about the room and then strode out.

The riders were very close now. They were pulling up in front of the station.

Pat stalked to the door and flung it open. Twenty or more armed men were milling about outside on sweaty, excited horses. Some of them were dismounting while others were pulling away from the main group as though they planned to surround the station.

One swift glance told Pat that the group was made up of his friends and neighbors throughout the Valley, with none of Harlow's men among them.

But this didn't make them less dangerous. They were aroused and blood-maddened by the awful crimes charged against Ezra, and Pat knew they would waste little time arguing about it if they got hold of the fugitive now.

He stepped easily out of the door and raised his right hand in a calm gesture of greeting.

He called out, "Hi there, Nate, what's all the excitement about?"

NATE TURNER was just stepping off his horse. One of the older of the Valley residents, Pat selected him as the probable leader. He saw the others looking at him queerly and heard his name being whispered from mouth to mouth as Turner came toward him.

Nate stopped ten feet in front of Pat and said gravely, "It ain't no use tryin' to cover up for him no longer, Pat. Where's he at?"

"Who?"

"Ezra." The syllables came out with the explosiveness of a gun-shot.

Pat shrugged his shoulders and asked mildly, "What do you-all want of him?"

Turner's gaze held Pat's steadily. "He's got to hang, Pat. Being yore friend won't help him no longer. We've come after him an' we're going to take him."

"Hold on a minute. What's Ezra done that yo're in a hanging mood?"

"What's he done?" Nate Turner exploded. "Are you standin' there an' telling me you don't know?"

"That's just what I'm doing."

"He killed four people last night after you turned him out of jail. Ethan Page an' his wife. Mrs. Kincaid an' Jake Munort. Murdered 'em all in cold blood, Pat, without giving ary one of 'em a chance. An' just awhile ago he rode hell-bent into the Trowbridge ranch all naked an' bleeding an' stole a fresh hawse an' made it away before little Tessie Trowbridge could get away and call her Paw an' the hands. He's gotta be stopped before he kills anybody else, Pat. Don't make the mistake of shielding him," Turner went on grimly. "We mean business an' if you stand in our way it'll be just too bad for you. Ain't that the way it is, boys?" He turned to the others.

Heads were nodded vigorously and there were growls of assent.

"All this is plumb crazy," Pat protested. "Ezra was with me all night after I helped him break jail. How in hell could he be ridin' around killing people like that?"

Turner shook his head angrily. "'Twon't to any good to lie for him. If you *were* with him, that makes you a candidate for hangin' too. Hand him over to us, Pat."

"What makes you think he's here?"

"Where else would he be?" Turner asked bitterly. "You an' Sam Sloan are the only friends he's got. An' we come acrost his hawse about a mile back with his leg broke from steppin' in a prairie dawg hole. Ezra's just about had time to make it here on foot an' we know you and Sam are hidin' him. Tell Sam to bring him out if he don't want his house burned down."

There was no mistaking the violently ugly humor of the Powder Valley posse. Pat knew that no arguments, however plausible, would prevail against their determination to take Ezra's life. They were all convinced that he was a mad killer, and nothing would change that.

"Sam ain't here," Pat said coolly.

"He's due to be here. He rode the mail down from Dutch Springs this mawnin'."

"He's rode for Doc Trimble," Pat explained loudly, hoping Kitty would hear. "His wife's in a bad way with the baby comin' and I stayed to help all I could. I ain't seen hide nor hair of Ezra since this mornin'," Pat went on heatedly. "I swear he hasn't killed nobody anyhow."

"Swearing it ain't so won't bring 'em back to life," Nate Turner told him. "And we're not swallowing yore story about Kitty Sloan neither. Why, I was talkin' to Doc Trimble just yesterday an' he said it'd be a couple more weeks. How'd you get shot up anyhow?" he ended curiously.

Pat grimaced down at his left shoulder. "It's a long story, an' you'd just go on calling me a liar if I was to tell you. But Kitty Sloan is the only one in the house and I can prove it."

HE STOPPED for a moment to listen. A high-pitched cry of agony came from the little shack behind him. He nodded with satisfaction and said, "Hear that? Does that sound like Kitty's baby was two weeks off?"

They all heard it. They all listened intently and some of their heads began nodding doubtfully. Pat pressed his advantage home. "I don't understand none of this foolishness about Ezra killin' people last night, but do you think I'd leave a crazy murderer inside the house with Kitty at a time like this? Friend or no friend! Do you think I'd do that to Kitty?"

"I reckon you'd do most anything," said Turner obstinately, "to keep Ezra from bein' caught."

"If I knew he was a killer?" Pat demanded angrily. "I wouldn't lift a hand to save him an' you know it, Nate. You and all the rest of you. Damn it, use some sense." He lifted his voice and played his trump card:

"I can't stand out here talkin' to you when Kitty's in this condition. I got water boiling on the stove an' maybe she needs me right now. Come on, two or three of you, an' search the house if you think I'm lying. But take it easy an' don't let on to Kitty yo're hunting for any madman."

The men nodded uneasy assent. Some of them moved forward to hold a whispered conference with Nate Turner, and all of them were listening with at least one ear to the sounds of prenatal distress coming from Kitty's bedroom.

Pat turned his back on them and threw a parting shot over his shoulder, "Yo're wasting time around here. Better come on an' see for yoreselves an' then ride back to where you found Ezra's hawse an' pick up the trail from there. If you-all are right about him he's more'n likely out murderin' some more women and children while yo're ganged up here."

He reached the door and stepped inside, struck a match and boldly lit a kerosene lamp in a wall bracket by the door.

Nate Turner and two of the other older ranchers came to the door hesitantly. They looked ashamed at their own insistence but were determined to do their duty.

Pat lifted down the lamp and moved it about to light every corner of the room, then led them into the small kitchen.

The stove was cherry-red and all

the water was boiling rapidly in the buckets and pots. Nate rubbed his jaw and stared sagely at the supply of boiling water and muttered in a low voice, "That's the ticket, awright. Plenty of hot water."

Pat shrugged and led the way back into the living room. "The only other room you ain't looked in is the bedroom. You wanta look in there? Under Kitty's bed maybe?" He moved to open the door, holding the lamp above his head so the light touched Kitty's contorted face on the pillow.

"No," said Turner hastily. "I don't reckon we need to, do we, fellers?"

The others shook their heads and backed away discreetly.

Two horses galloped up as they all went toward the door. They stepped aside to get out of Sam Sloan's way as he flung himself inside, his face drawn and bitter.

"How is she comin'?" he demanded harshly of Pat. "Do these yahoos think this here is a circus or somethin'?"

"She's all right. You got the doc?"

"Right behind me." Sam turned angrily on the three ranchers who were backing toward the door. "Ain't you-all got no bringings-up?" he demanded scathingly. "Cain't a woman have a baby without the hull damn Valley pushin' in tuh get grand-stand seats?"

DOC TRIMBLE came shambling in just then. He was a small untidy man wearing thick-lensed glasses and emitting an alcoholic odor. He glared around at the five men in the living room and snapped, "All right now. Clear out, all of you. I've got my work cut out for me and I don't want to be bothered by any blundering idiots." He snatched the lamp from Pat's hand and hurried in to Kitty while the ranchers filed out with Pat and Sam behind them.

"I dunno what it's all about," Pat said aloud to Sam with a warning wink. "They all come bustin' up here with some hullabaloo about chasin' Ezra and him running around crazy an' killing people and such-like crazy talk. They thought you and me was hidin' him an' wouldn't believe me when I said you were riding for the doctor."

"We're mighty sorry to butt in," Nat Turner apologized. "I guess maybe he didn't come thisaway after all. We'll be ridin' on, I reckon."

"While yo're here one of you might's well make yoreselves useful and ride to the Lazy Mare to get Sally," Pat grated. "She's goin' to feel mighty bad about not bein' here to help."

"Shore," said Turner hastily. "Glad to be neighborly an' help out. I'll send one of the boys fast as he can ride."

"An' don't tell her nothing about me being shot up or nothing about Ezra and that stuff," Pat shouted after him. "She'll be worried enough about Kitty."

As the ranchers mounted and prepared to ride away, Pat explained to Sam in a low voice, "Kitty's fine. There's lotsa hot water an' everything's all right. Excepting that Ezra's laying under her bed knocked out. He was gettin' away from that posse and come and climbed in the window an' scared her near to death an' I had to knock him out so she wouldn't be any more scared."

"Does she know what they're sayin' about him?" Sam demanded.

"Yep. That's why she was so scared. She was awake and heard Oscar Penrose and us talkin'."

Sam drew him farther away from the house and spoke in a low, troubled voice, "It's lookin' worser an' worser for Ezra all thuh time. In Dutch Springs I heard that Jake Munort had willed his ranch to Ezra just a few weeks ago."

"Willed his ranch to Ezra?" Pat echoed with sharp incredulity. "Why'd he do that?"

"Lord knows. No reason anybody knows 'cept how Jake hated Eustis Harlow an' wouldn't sell or borry from him. Folks think he was scared his ranch would go on the open market after he died, so he up an' willed it to Ezra just out of sheer ornaryness."

"So I reckon they're sayin' Ezra murdered him to get hold of them six sections?" Pat guessed disgustedly.

"That's about it."

"What about the Pages and Miz

Kincaid? Had *they* willed *their* ranches to Ezra too?"

"Nope. Not that anybody knows. Nobody knows any reason why he'd kill them too, but they think maybe they'll find out a reason later. Harlow has got himself in solid with a lot of 'em," Sam went on angrily, "by comin' out today with two thousand dollars in cash that Ethan Page was borrowin' from him on the ranch and hadn't never got hold of. Harlow's givin' it to the Page kids, an' folks thinks that's mighty gen'rous of him because they say he coulda kept quiet about it an' tore up the mortgage an' kept his money if he'd bin a mind to."

"You mean he's got a signed mortgage from Ethan Page?"

"That's right. But nobody else knowed Ethan had signed it yet, so Harlow's showin' off by bein' honest about it and forkin' over the money anyhow."

PAT STEVENS sank down on his haunches by the side of the shack and slowly rolled a cigarette. Everything was quiet inside. Doctor Trimble had taken over with his customary efficiency, and both men had ceased to worry about Kitty. As long as the doctor was sober enough to walk he was capable of delivering a baby.

Pat lit his cigarette and then said musingly, "I don't reckon Harlow had a mortgage on the Kincaid ranch too, did he?"

"Nope. The old lady was dead set against borrying money. But George'll probably borry some now with his Maw dead."

"Which would be a good reason for Eustis Harlow wantin' her dead," muttered Pat.

"I thought about that too." Sam shook his head worriedly. "But it don't work out with Jake Munort an' the Pages. Harlow didn't have any reason for wantin' them dead. Might've thought that about the Pages if he'd held out the money Ethan had borried, but he spikes that by comin' right out an' sayin' he's holding it for the kids. An' with Jake's ranch willed to Ezra like it was, it didn't do Harlow no good for Jake to die neither."

"But maybe Harlow didn't know about Jake's will," Pat pointed out. "I don't reckon many people did."

"Mebby not, but that still don't give him no reason for wantin' the Pages dead. Look here," Sam exclaimed. "Yo're figgerin' the same way I am 'bout them murders. You *know* Ezra didn't do 'em, don't you?"

"I'd like it better if I hadn't seen him shoot at me," Pat muttered.

"That's right." Sam was taken aback. "'Twouldn't do Harlow no good to kill you. Anyhow, how could anybody mistake anybody else for Ezra? Lord knows, there ain't another soul in the world that ugly, I reckon."

"That's one reason," Pat argued, "why it would be easier to fix up a disguise to look like him. Because he *is* so danged ugly. It'd be harder to fix up to look like a common hombre like me. But I haven't got red whiskers an' a scarred face an' one eye. See what I mean?"

"I reckon mebby I do," Sam muttered thoughtfully. "You mean another feller wouldn't have to look too much like him to make everybody think 'twas Ezra right away. Red whiskers an' a twisted up face. . . ." He stopped suddenly. "But who would do it? An' who got Ezra out of jail? An' where was he all last night?"

"Those're things I'd like to ask Ezra," Pat said grimly. He threw away his cigarette and got up. "Let's drag him outta Kitty's room an' see can we wake him up yet."

Sam went in with him. There was a light in the kitchen and they stopped in the living room and looked through the open door to see Doc Trimble standing there draining the last drop out of the pint whisky bottle Pat had dropped on the floor when he ran in to rescue Kitty from Ezra.

Doc looked at them unabashed and said mournfully, "Somebody spilled most of it on the floor here. A mighty careless way to treat whisky. Must have lots more around, eh?" His gaze roved avidly around the kitchen.

Pat laughed and told him, "Nope. Sam never has but one bottle here at a time."

"You hadn't ought to be soakin' yoreself with whisky nohow," Sam reproved him. "Why ain't you in there takin' care of Kitty?"

"Because Kitty is in there taking care of herself." Doc Trimble hiccoughed gently. "I gave her something to keep her quiet for a couple of hours. You might use some of this hot water to scrub up the blood off the bedroom floor," he went on with a wave of his arm toward the steaming containers on the stove. "And I'll be obliged if you'll remove the corpse from under the bed. I didn't like to mention it while those other men were here, but the presence of corpses in a delivery room is really distasteful to me."

BOTH men started guiltily. Pat swallowed hard and asked in a hushed voice, "Did you say a corpse, Doc?"

"I didn't examine him closely," the doctor admitted. "I assumed he was dead when he didn't object after I inadvertently kicked him a few times."

Both men hurried into the bedroom. Kitty was lying on her side sleeping peacefully under the influence of the potion the doctor had administered.

Sam knelt beside the bed and felt of Ezra anxiously, then breathed a great sigh of relief and muttered, "He's still warm, Pat. Le's roll him out."

They tugged at him and rolled him out from under the bed, and then Sam got him by the heels and dragged him across the floor into the living room.

Doc Trimble stood in the kitchen door and observed them with professional interest. "So it is Ezra," he murmured. "I guessed as much when Kitty asked me not to betray his presence under her bed. A fine lady, that," he added to Sam, "but most inconsiderate in being too impatient to wait the two weeks I had planned for her."

He came and knelt by Ezra's side and made a deft examination of the unconscious man while Sam and Pat drew back and watched him.

"He has a good solid head," said Trimble approvingly. "He'll be all right in a couple of hours." He got up and fastidiously dusted off his hands.

"Can't we wake him up before that, Doc?" asked Pat anxiously.

"I don't know how. You might hit him again in the same place." Trimble shrugged. "Safer to let him sleep it off." He strolled in to see how his patient was resting.

Pat and Sam studied the big man dubiously. "Two hours yet 'fore he wakes up," Sam groaned. "Seems like we never will find out. . . "

He stopped speaking and turned to look at Pat as they heard a rider coming up outside. By common consent, they quickly went to the door and stepped out into the cool of the evening.

The rider was Pinky Wright, owner of a small horse ranch west of the express station and a few miles south of Dutch Springs. He was leading two horses and he looked dusty and tired.

"Evenin'," he greeted Pat and Sam. "I was ridin' by and thought I'd say howdy. Didn't know I'd find you here, Pat." He looked curiously at Pat's wounded arm but didn't mention it.

"Squat an' roll a cigarette," Sam said hospitably. "Doc Trimble's inside with Kitty is why I won't ask you to stay an' eat supper."

"Is Kitty sick?"

"Sam's sicker'n she is," Pat chuckled. "It's always harder on the papas than on the mamas."

"Oh." Pinky nodded knowingly. He rolled a cigarette and then said casually, "I've been out riding the range all day huntin' a pair of cussed strays." He jerked his head toward the led horses. "Didn't know anything about none of the trouble in the Valley till a few minutes ago when I met up with one of the VX hands riding home from town. He told me a plumb mouthful."

"About Ezra?" Sam asked angrily.

"Yeh. Jake Munort an' the Pages an' all. They claim you turned Ezra outta jail last night an' let him go off on a killing spree," he told Pat.

PAT didn't say anything. He knew Pinky Wright well, and they had always been friends. He didn't want to smash up that friendship now if he could avoid it.

"He told me about Jake Munort willin' his ranch to Ezra, and about his boss bein' so generous and offerin' to pay over two thousand dollars to the Page childern that Ethan had borrowed but hadn't never got from him," Pinky went on deliberately, "an' it sort of s'prised me.

"You see I talked to Ethan Page last night right after the meetin', and he was plumb boilin' mad about how everybody that owed Harlow money voted the way he wanted an' put Tripo in for sheriff. And Ethan swore and be damned that he'd changed his mind and wasn't goin' to borrow that money from Harlow after all. An' the funny thing is, I heard him tell Harlow so. Harlow didn't know I was listening and I didn't mean to, but I heard Ethan say he wasn't never goin' to sign that mortgage Harlow had drawed up, and that Harlow might just as well tear it up."

Pinky Wright stopped to draw in a deep breath after this long speech, and for a moment the silence was unbroken.

Then Pat leaned forward and asked sharply, "You heard Ethan Page tell Harlow he wasn't *going* to sign the mortgage?"

"That's right. An' Ethan rode off for home right afterward, so I sorta wonder how the mortgage got signed."

"Did you say anything about that to Harlow's hand just now?" Pat asked in a hushed tone of excitement.

"I sure did. I told him a lot of folks was going to wonder the same thing when I told 'em what I'd heard Ethan tell Harlow last night." Pinky stood up and yawned. "Didn't know you'd be here, Pat, but I reckoned Sam would like to know, what with all this crazy talk going around about Ezra shootin' those people. Looks to me more like Harlow had it done," Pinky went on sharply, "on account of he wanted to get hold of Ethan's ranch and Ethan had decided not to borrow from him after all."

"Yo're practically accusin' Harlow of forging Ethan's signature to that mortgage after Ethan was dead," Pat mused.

"Why yes. I reckon that's about the way it stacks up. I never did trust that Harlow feller." Pinky started toward his horse.

"Wait a minute," Pat called. "Does that VX hand know you've been horse-huntin' all day and haven't told this to anyone else?"

"I reckon he does. I remember telling him I was too dog-tired to ride into town tonight, but I'd sure spread the story around the Valley tomorrow." Pinky gathered up his reins and mounted.

"D'yuh know what that means?" Sam demanded excitedly as Pinky rode away. "It means Harlow will hafta kill Pinky tonight before he has a chance to tell anybody about the forgery."

"That's just what it means." Pat lunged to his feet. "Hook up two fast hawses to yore buckboard an' help me load Ezra in. I'm puttin' him back in jail so there won't be any question where *he* is tonight while somebody is gettin' at Pinky."

CHAPTER XV

PAT went back into the house while Sam raced to the corral to throw harness on a team of his fastest horses and hook them to the buckboard. Doc Trimble was sitting in the living room, patiently rocking to and fro while he puffed on a gurgling pipe.

"I got to take Ezra in to jail in Dutch Springs," Pat told the doctor, "an' I reckon I'll need Sam in there a little later to help out. Will you be needin' either of us here? Sally'll be along right quick, I reckon," he added hastily. "Can you and her make out all right alone?"

Trimble took the pipe out of his mouth and chuckled, "Lord bless you, Pat Stevens, if you can arrange some way to get Sam out from underfoot tonight. I've never lost a father in this business, but I never know when I'm going to."

"You'll have to help me with it," Pat warned him. "Sam won't take my

word for it that he ain't needed. I'll tell him how bad I need him in town, an' then when Sally gets here maybe you can run him off."

"Leave it to me," the old doctor said grimly. "I'll get rid of him if I have to chase him off with his own gun. So you're taking Ezra in to jail, Pat?" Trimble mused with a troubled glance at the unconscious figure on the floor.

"That's right. He'll be safest there." Pat paused, frowning over his own uneasy thoughts. "You know Ezra purty good, Doc. What do you think 'bout these things they're tellin' on him? You ever see any signs that he might turn off crazylike that?"

"Turn into a homicidal maniac?" scoffed Doc Trimble. "Not Ezra. He hasn't the sort of brain that turns crazy, Pat. I mean that for a scientific fact," he went on earnestly. "He's easy-going and quiet and not too bright. He just isn't the type to go around murdering women and children."

Pat drew in a long breath of relief. "That's the way me an' Sam figure it too, but I'm shore glad to hear you back us up."

Sam Sloan came bustling in the door just then. "Got the buckboard hooked up," he announced. "Can you he'p me load him in, Pat?"

The doctor got up and said good-naturedly, "I've got two good arms. You take the heavy part in front and I'll take his feet, Sam. You rest that shoulder of yours, Pat."

Pat went past them and held the door open while they staggered out under the dead weight of Ezra's two hundred and fifty pounds. They loaded him into the back of the buckboard with some difficulty, and then Trimble trotted back into the house.

"You reckon you can han'le things in town?" Sam asked anxiously as Pat gathered up the lines. "Folks are mighty bent on stringin' Ezra up without no trial."

"Won't be many of 'em around town by the time I get there," Pat explained. "I'll get him in the jail all right, but there's liable to be bad trouble later when the posses start driftin' in an' word gets around where he is. That's when I'll need you and yore guns," he went on sharply. "I'll be ridin' out to Pinky Wright's place. Soon as Sally gets here to help the doctor, you'd better ride in an' be ready to take over."

"I dunno 'bout that," muttered Sam, "Seems like I oughtta stay close by Kitty. I don't reckon Doc Trimble would like it for me to ride off an' leave him."

"*You* can't do nothin' for Kitty. Lots better if you've got something to keep yore mind off things." Pat climbed up into the front seat of the buckboard. "I'm goin' to be trusting you to be in town to see nothing happens to Ezra while I'm out at Pinky's." He shook the lines and whooped at the half-wild team before Sam could offer any more objections. The buckboard lurched away and Pat guided them into the Dutch Springs road with one hand, then settled back and gave them their heads.

IT WAS quite dark and lights were beginning to show in Dutch Springs half an hour later when the buckboard neared the town. The broncs were tired after their mad gallop, and Pat easily slowed them to a sedate trot, swinging them off the main road and making a circle to come up unobserved at the back of Mr. Winters' general store.

He jumped out and looped the lines under a front hub, then knotted them to a spoke so any forward movement would tighten the lines and automatically draw the team back, and then he hurried in through the back door to the dark storeroom in the rear of the store.

A gleam of light showed in from the front of the store, and Pat threaded his way forward between rows of packing cases to a point where he could peer out and see Mr. Winters behind the meat counter waiting on a late customer.

Mrs. Willis was buying some salt pork and insisting that the storekeeper cut off a piece from the lean end. Mr. Winters was grumbling about it while he explained that his other customers took the fat along with the lean, but Mrs. Willis was

adamant. Her Henry wouldn't eat fat pork, she told him acidly, and he ought to know it as well as she by this time.

Pat stayed back out of sight and waited impatiently until the transaction was completed. The moment Mrs. Willis walked out the door, he leaned forward and said, "Pssst," loudly.

Mr. Winters jumped a foot in the air. He dropped the side of salt pork onto the sawdust-covered floor and whirled about indignantly. The anger faded from his face and was replaced by worry when he recognized Pat staring out at him. He hurried around the counter, exclaiming, "You shouldn't be here, Pat. Not till they find Ezra. The whole Valley is blaming you for what happened last night."

"Lock up the front door," Pat Stevens told him tersely. "Quick. Before any more customers come in. Don't stand there lookin' at me," he went on impatiently. . . "I'm in bad trouble an' I need help."

After a long, searching glance at Pat's troubled face and his wounded condition, Mr. Winters nodded and trotted to the front door. He barred it on the inside and blew out the lamp up front, then came loping back and took down the lamp above the meat counter.

"We'll go into the back where nobody can see a light from the front." He followed Pat back and pulled a door shut so the light wouldn't shine out. "Now then," he said severely, "what kind of doings is this, Pat? Who shot you up like that? Where's Ezra? We've got to get hold of him before he kills anyone else."

"Ezra hasn't killed anybody," Pat snapped out. "He ain't going to kill anybody if you'll help me. You got a gun around here?"

"Lots of them in the showcase out front. And I've got a double-barreled shotgun. . . but what do you mean about Ezra, Pat? Everybody knows. . ."

"Everybody's crazy," Pat growled. "I've got Ezra out back in Sam's buckboard. He's unconscious an' Doc Trimple says he won't come to for a couple of hours. There's no time for explanations," he went on swiftly. "You've got to trust me an' help me. All I want is to get Ezra locked up safe in jail with someone to guard him there so he can't get away again and there won't be any lynchin' party . . . not till I get back. Is that too much to ask?"

"Why, no. I guess not," said Winters uneasily. "But if you've got him, Pat . . ."

"We're wasting time," Pat interrupted. "Think you can round up two or three men that still trust Pat Stevens enough to stand guard with you over Ezra while I go after the real killer?"

"Yes. I'll go into the Gold Eagle and see who's there." Pat's crisp tone of authority reassured the storekeeper.

"Don't let on what you want to the others in the Gold Eagle," Pat warned him. "The fewer that knows Ezra is in jail the better. I don't want any riots an' shootin' while I'm gone."

"I'll go out the back way. You stay right here until I come back." The storekeeper hurried out and Pat moved back and sat down with a sigh of weariness on a wooden box.

HE HADN'T realized how tired he was. And hungry too. He hadn't eaten a bite since supper the night before. It seemed days or weeks ago. It was difficult to realize it was only a little more than twenty-four hours before when he and Ezra were sitting at the supper table at the Lazy Mare.

He got up and searched about until he found an open cracker barrel. He got out a huge handful of dry crackers and began munching them, and then found a keg of apple cider resting on two wooden saw-horses with a wooden faucet for drawing off jugs of cider.

He couldn't find any cup or glass, but there was an empty jug on the floor and he ran that half-full and carried it back to the cracker barrel. He washed down the dry crackers with sips of cider and wished Winters would hurry back. He was afraid there wasn't much time. He had to

get out to Pinky Wright's ranch before there was another fatality. He didn't think Pinky knew the full extent of the danger he was in. Pinky was a sort of happy-go-lucky fellow without an ounce of fear in his makeup, but fearlessness wouldn't stop a cowardly bullet coming out of the night without warning.

Pat jumped to his feet and hurried to the back door when he heard voices outside.

Mr. Winters was there with John Boyd and Vernon Pike. Vernon ran a little freighting business that hauled supplies into Dutch Springs from the railroad line at Hopewell Junction, and he was a stolid, dependable sort of man.

John Boyd said, "Howdy, Pat. What's this here stuff Winters has been tellin' us about Ezra?"

"He's right here in Sam's buckboard. I want to drive him around to the jail and put him in without anyone knowin' about it. An' I want you three to see he don't get out."

"Wait until I get my shotgun," Winters interjected. He hurried inside.

"What's it all about?" Boyd persisted. "If what they say about Ezra is true, why do we waste time lockin' him up?"

"It's not true an' I'm going to prove it," snapped Pat. "If I can't prove him innocent you boys'll have him right there in jail. Is that fair enough?"

"Sounds all right," Boyd agreed doubtfully. "But we're liable to have trouble when it gets spread around that he's there. The boys are mighty riled up about all the killin's last night."

"That'll be up to you," Pat told them. "I hope I won't be gone too long. And Sam'll be in soon to help you out."

Mr. Winters came out with his sawed-off shotgun, and Pat led the way to the buckboard. "You and Vernon walk on ahead to the corner an' see if it's clear," he told John Boyd. "Winters an' I'll follow along slow."

THE tall rancher and the manager of the freighting business went on toward the end of the alley. Pat untied the lines from the wheel and Winters gave him a hand up into the seat. Then the storekeeper climbed up beside him and rested his murderous weapon across his knees. Pat chuckled at the expression on Winters' face as he clucked to the team.

"I shore never thought I'd see you mixed up in anything illegal."

"It's catching," Winters told him solemnly. "Last night I did my best to help Ezra break out of jail but you'd already beaten us to it. Now I find myself trying to sneak him back behind bars." He sighed loudly and complained, "And I'll be dogged if I know what any of it's about. Everything's topsy-turvy. Last night John and I were hating your guts, and tonight we're taking orders from you. I sure hope you know what you're doing this time."

"So do I." Pat pulled up the team at the end of the alley. In the moonlight he could see Boyd and Vernon Pike sauntering across toward the jail in front of them. No one else was in sight on this back street.

Pat let the team out at a cautious walk, following the advance guard slowly. He didn't have any idea where Tripo or any of his deputies were. He could only hope they weren't headquartered in the sheriff's office behind the jail. If they were, there would surely be some shooting before Ezra was put back safely behind bars. And if it became known too soon that Ezra was locked up, that would spoil his hopes too. He was pinning everything on the assumption that Eustis Harlow thought Ezra was still at large and would be accused of any other crimes that were committed that night—

Yet, though Pat felt he knew the answer, he had to have proof. His theory was too fantastic to hope anyone would listen to him without indubitable proof. Right now the whole Valley was aroused to the madness of blood-lust against Ezra, and it was going to take a lot of proving to turn their anger away from the big one-eyed man.

If he could get Ezra safely in jail, with only these three trusted friends aware of the maneuver, Pat felt he had a good chance to catch the real

villain red-handed when he tried to murder Pinky Wright. For, if Pat's theory was correct, Pinky would *have* to die—and quickly—before he could go around spreading his assertion that Ethan Page had never actually signed the mortgage Harlow held on his ranch.

That was a break Pat hadn't bargained for. Until the moment of Pinky's chance stop-off at Sam's, Pat hadn't really seen any way out of the tangle though he had already dimly sensed the truth. But it hadn't made much sense until he realized that Ethan Page's signature must be forged on the mortgage. Then the entire plot became damnably clear. He began to see that one man had a motive for all four seemingly unrelated murders, when in the beginning it had appeared that Harlow had profited by only one of them.

PAT wasn't sure, yet, just how much Pinky understood about the whole set-up. He didn't know whether Pinky realized he was deliberately asking to be murdered when he sent the VX hand riding to Harlow with his story about knowing that Ethan Page had changed his mind about borrowing money from Harlow, but he thought Pinky did suspect what the probable consequences would be. Now, it was up to him to get out to Pinky Wright's ranch before the inevitable could happen.

Pat slapped the team of broncs into a trot as they rounded a turn and he saw the jail and sheriff's office lying dark and deserted behind the courthouse. Vernon Pike and Boyd had already reached the jail when Pat drove up.

"It's all right," Boyd told him gruffly. "Not a soul anywhere around. The jail door's standin' open just like you left it after you took Ezra out last night."

It required too much effort and would have taken too long for Pat to try to explain to them that it wasn't he who had released Ezra. There would be plenty of time for such explanations later.

He said, "Drag him out of the back an' stick him inside. An' all three of you swear you'll stay on guard an' see he doesn't get away again if he comes to. Maybe you'd better tie him up while he's unconscious, just in case, since you haven't got any key."

"Didn't you keep the key after you unlocked the door last night?" Vernon Pike asked in astonishment while he and Boyd rolled the heavy body of Ezra out of the buckboard.

"It got lost," Pat said. "I'm trustin' you to stay here an' keep watch," he added in a low tone to Winters.

"Where are you goin', Pat? What're you in such a hurry for? You'd better tell me . . ."

"There's no time for talkin' now." Pat glanced over his shoulder and saw that Boyd and Pike were dragging Ezra inside the dark jail. He braced his feet against the dashboard and shouted at the team. Rested from their hard run in from the express station, the team bolted away from the jail and Pat headed them southward from town, toward Pinky Wright's place.

CHAPTER XVI

AFTER leaving Pat and Sam at the Pony Express way station, Pinky Wright jogged along toward home leading the two stray horses behind him. Dusk was deepening into velvety darkness, and Pinky was very tired. He was too tired to do much thinking about Harlow and Ezra and all that mixup. Pinky Wright was a forthright sort of person without an ounce of guile in his wiry body. He had felt a surge of righteous anger when the VX rider told him about Harlow bringing in a mortgage signed by Ethan Page when he knew Ethan had refused to sign the mortgage; and he immediately jumped to the conclusion that Harlow had seized the opportunity to forge Ethan's signature after his death.

The realization that he was the only person in the Valley who knew about this gave Pinky a feeling of importance. If Ezra hadn't been definitely recognized as the murderer of all those people, Pinky might have suspected Harlow. As it was, he didn't actually suspect the

wealthy Texan of murder. He had just said that to Sam and Pat to make them feel a little better about their partner. Pinky just thought Harlow was smart enough to turn Ethan Page's death to his own advantage when he heard about it.

And Pinky had an idea he'd have a visit from Harlow before the night was over. That was why he had been careful to tell the VX rider that he hadn't yet told his story to anyone, and was too tired to bother telling it to anyone tonight. With that knowledge, Pinky figured Harlow would *have* to come to him tonight if he was guilty of forging the signature.

He'd probably try to buy him off, Pinky thought happily. He envisioned Eustis Harlow down on his knees begging him to keep quiet about the whole thing. That would be pleasant. He hated Harlow's guts and would enjoy nothing more than telling him to go to hell.

Pinky wasn't worried about what Harlow might do after he refused. He had a vast contempt for Harlow, and didn't think the rancher was the sort to resort to physical violence. He was the kind of man, Pinky thought, who got his way through trickery and the law courts. Besides, Pinky carried a gun and knew how to use it. He certainly wasn't afraid of Harlow.

But a tiny voice of inward caution had urged Pinky to share his knowledge with someone else before Harlow had a chance to get to him. That's why he went out of his way to ride by the express station and casually tell his story to Sam. If anything did happen to him, Harlow still wouldn't get the Page ranch because now Sam and Pat knew about the forged mortgage too.

All in all, Pinky was quite pleased with himself as he neared his home place. No matter what happened, Harlow's guns were spiked. And Pinky sure was looking forward to the interview with the rich rancher who thought he could use the power of his money to run the whole Valley. It was going to be fun telling him off.

THE lantern swinging gently overhead cast a grotesque shadow of Pinky onto the wall behind him. It was very still in the small, isolated ranch house. Pinky kept glancing at the open window across the length of the room and he was subconsciously straining his ears to catch the sound of approaching hoofbeats that would warn him a visitor was coming.

He thought it was time for Harlow to get there. The VX rider had had plenty of time to get to the ranch and tell the boss what Pinky had said, and it wasn't more than an hour's ride from the VX to Pinky's place.

He shifted his chair back from the table slightly so his right hand was free to reach his holstered shooting iron. He didn't really expect Eustis Harlow to come a-shootin', but you never could tell about a man like that. Harlow acted soft and inoffensive, but that might just be a cover-up for something else. It was just as well to be ready for anything, Pinky always figured.

He was very comfortable as he sat and waited for Harlow to come. His belly was full and his mind was at rest. He looked forward to the interview. He grinned happily as he anticipated it, still keeping his ears keened for any sound outside the house.

Seemed to him it was unnaturally quiet out there. The moon had risen and there should by rights be some crickets and katydids outside the window singing it a cheery song of welcome like they did 'most every night.

But they weren't singing tonight. Not a sound came through the open window. It was plumb funny. Not even the wailing howl of a coyote from a distant ridge. It seemed like, by golly, that all the animals and night insects were holding their breaths as if they waited for something to happen.

Pinky Wright stirred uneasily in his chair. He wasn't a superstitious man but this unnatural silence was beginning to get under his skin. It was as though he alone were left alive in a dead world of silence.

He felt his hair beginning to prickle and rise at the back of his neck. He could dang near *hear* the silence, by golly. It held an ominous portent that made the chills run up and down his spine.

He told himself this was crazy, but beads of sweat were beginning to stand on his face. He impatiently pushed his coffee cup back and started to get up.

Half erect, he froze in that position leaning forward with blunt fingertips resting lightly on the table in front of him.

What was that sound outside? Or, was it even a sound? It was like the furtive crunch of a bootheel in the soft dirt under the window.

But it wasn't repeated. He wasn't even sure he had heard anything. Maybe his nerves were playing tricks on him. But it was a hell of a time to be developing nerves. He was getting as bad as a scary woman. Jumping at some imagined sound.

He straightened up resolutely . . . and he stared across the room at the red-whiskered and contorted face of Ezra outside his window.

One eye-socket was vacant and the other eye was inflamed with murderous fury. The face seemed disembodied, as though it floated in the thin night air outside the window; and the illusion was strengthened by the soundlessness with which it had appeared there, as though it were an evil spirit that had materialized from out of the night.

Pinky Wright was hypnotized by the suggestion of noxious evil that flamed toward him from the single eye outside the window.

He was powerless to move. He knew what was happening but he couldn't do anything to avert what was to come. It was like he was suddenly standing off to the side and watching his own body. He felt sorry for himself, but there was nothing he could do. He had to stand there and watch Pinky Wright die.

He saw the muzzle of a gun slowly appear out of the darkness from below the window ledge. It steadied on him and he waited for it to belch death in his direction. Curiously, he wasn't afraid. It seemed like all his emotions were dead, as if he were already dead.

Nothing mattered any more. He wanted Ezra to shoot and get it over with. He wondered if the others had felt that way. He wondered why Ezra had singled him out for his next victim when he was only trying to do the one-eyed man a favor. He wanted to shout out to him that he was making a mistake, but he couldn't open his mouth to form the words.

He stood like that and waited for Ezra to fire.

He saw movement behind the big, red-whiskered man. Just the suggestion of movement in the silvery moonlight. . . and then the blow descended on Ezra's head.

THE menacing .45 exploded as Ezra went down. A bullet buried itself in the wall behind Pinky and the loud report released him from the grip of the unseen force that held him motionless.

He lunged toward the window, drawing his gun as he ran. A figure straightened up and confronted him.

It was Pat Stevens. He said curtly, "That'll be all for now, Pinky. I got him in time. Come on out an' help me load him in my buckboard an' we'll haul him in to town where there's a lynching party waitin'."

Pinky turned and ran around to the door and outside. He didn't understand any of it. He didn't know how either Ezra or Pat had got there, nor why they were there. But Pat's cold voice told him it was all up now with Ezra. This time he had been caught in the act of attempted murder, and he would have to pay the penalty.

Pat met him at the corner of the house. "I'll get the buckboard an' drive up so we can load him in. I tied my team down by the creek an' slipped up quiet because I figured this was due to happen."

Pat trotted away toward the creek before Pinky had a chance to ask any questions. He walked on around the corner and stopped beside the bulky, crumpled body on the ground. He found it strong. It was clear that his

attacker was just knocked out and would live long enough to be hanged.

This saddened Pinky. He thought it was too danged bad Pat hadn't finished the job right there and then. He'd always liked Ezra. Seemed like a pity he had to end up this way.

Pat came driving up in the buckboard, and he leaped out to use his one good arm helping Pinky load the big man into the back of the buckboard. Pat was grim and silent, and Pinky respected his silence as they both climbed onto the front seat and started for Dutch Springs. He knew Pat must feel mighty bad about the whole thing. He felt bad enough about it his ownself.

CHAPTER XVII

KITTY had come out from under the influence of her sedative and Doctor Trimble was leaving her out for a time. He didn't believe in making childbirth too easy for his patients. When the pains got too bad he'd give her something again to ease them, but in the meantime he let nature take its course.

He had an idea it was good for the fathers too. Let them stew in their own juice a little, Doc Trimble thought grimly. Let 'em find out what a woman went through with when she brought his child into the world. Give them something to think about for awhile.

Well, Sam Sloan was getting something to think about. He was striding up and down in the darkness outside the express station, following a beaten path to the corral and back. When he reached the far end of the course he had to strain to hear Kitty's pain, and he turned and hurried back because it didn't seem right for him to get so far away.

Then, as he neared the house it got so bad that it was all he could do to keep from turning and running away from it again. He tried to think about other things to take his mind off Kitty, but he couldn't. He kept trying to get his thoughts on Pat and Ezra in town, but it wasn't any use. He couldn't even make out to worry about Ezra. Kitty was so much more important. He was sure she was dying, and he didn't think Doc Trimble cared. He fiercely suspected that the doctor wished she would go ahead and die so he could get back to Dutch Springs and the bottle Sam had torn him away from. He suspected Trimble of a being cynical old fellow who hated all his patients because he had to stay relatively sober at times to care for them.

Sam was stolidly striding back toward the corral when he heard a buckboard driving up in front of the station. He whirled and sprinted back in time to intercept Sally Stevens as she stepped out of the vehicle.

She grabbed his arm and demanded, "How is she, Sam? I came as fast as I could."

"You can hear how she is," Sam muttered. "I'm shore glad you come, Sally. I don't trust that there Doc Trimble nohow."

Sally laughed lightly and patted his arm. "I'm not nearly as worried about Kitty as I am about Pat right now. Do you know what they're saying about him, Sam? About Pat and Ezra?"

"Yeh. I know all about it. Pat wants me to come into town to he'p them but I don't see how I can. Not with Kitty so bad off. I'm gonna stay here jest in case."

Sally stopped dead still on the threshold into the station. She turned slowly and asked in a tremulous voice, "Have you seen Pat?"

"Shore. An' he's awright. Jest a bullet through one shoulder," Sam scoffed. "Jest as soon's he gets Ezra back in jail, I don't see what. . ."

"What's that? About putting Ezra back in jail? And you say Pat's wounded?" Sally's voice rose hysterically.

"Not bad, he ain't. Yuh see, he knocked Ezra out when he come here an' clumb in the window an' scairt Kitty plumb outta her wits an' so Pat loaded him in the buckboard an' took him in to jail. An' he wants me tuh come in but I don't. . ."

"Mrs. Stevens?" said Doctor Trimble cheerily from inside. "You're just in time to help me. Now, if we can

just get rid of that fat-headed husband, you and I will get right to work."

"You bet we're going to get rid of him," Sally blazed out. "How dare you hang around here, Sam Sloan, when Pat and Ezra need you?"

"Well now I. . ." Sam backed away uneasily.

"You get on a horse and ride for town," Sally's voice lashed at him. "Don't you dare come back here till everything's fixed up." She stepped in and slammed the door shut to emphasize her words.

SAM shook his head and started toward the corrals at a shambling trot. It didn't seem like, dagnab it, that a man had any rights a-tall when a baby was gettin' born. He just didn't count no more. The way women acted you'd think fathers weren't even necessary.

Couldn't blame Sally, though. He guessed she *was* worried about Pat. Though Sam couldn't for the life of him see why. Pat could take care of himself. With one arm shot off, Pat was still a match for Harlow and Tripo an' all the rest.

But Sam didn't waste any time getting his fastest horse saddled. Some of Sally's urgency had been communicated to him. She had come at once to help Kitty even though she was worried to death about her husband, so Sam reckoned he couldn't do any less.

He flung himself into the saddle and let the horse out. He didn't slow as he went past the lighted station where Sally and the doctor were watching over Kitty. He headed north and put all his riding skill into the job of covering the miles to Dutch Springs in the shortest possible time.

Men were milling about the streets and the hitch-rail in front of the Gold Eagle was lined with horses when Sam thundered into town. He pulled up and leaped from the saddle and trotted into the packed saloon. He saw the tall figure of Tripo at the bar with Pat's silver badge gleaming on his vest, and the new sheriff was haranguing the other men in the saloon when Sam strode in:

". . .ain't no tellin' who he'll kill tuhnight, fellers, an' that's a fac'," Tripo was proclaiming. "I'd say there ain't no man woman or child in the Valley safe in their beds till that varmint's safe strung up. When he escaped that posse out south this afternoon, I got a notion he headed down towards Pinky Wright's hawse ranch, an' that's where I'm gonna hunt fer him next. Who's ridin' with me?"

A shout went up from men who were willing to accept Tripo's leadership. By that time Sam had threaded his way among them until he stood directly in front of Tripo.

"I reckon that talk yo're makin' is headed at Ezra?" he asked angrily.

Tripo glanced down at the wiry little Pony Express rider as though irritated by this interruption. "I reckon it is, little feller. Anythin' you got tuh say about it?"

"Only that yo're lyin' when you say Ezra done any of them things."

There was instant silence in the saloon. Men began to sidle back to get away from the two in front of the bar. Tripo's arms were folded across his chest contemptuously while Sam waited for him to take up the challenge of his words.

There was a commotion in the doorway just then. A young puncher plunged into the saloon shouting, "Hey you fellers! Know what? Ezry's in jail right now. Ezry's locked up in the jail right here in Dutch Springs!"

"Whatsat?" Tripo whirled on him, disregarding Sam Sloan for the moment. "What cussed foolishness is that? We all know Pat Stevens turned him loose last night."

"Shore, but Pat brung him back too," the young waddy announced triumphantly. "Not more'n a hour ago. An' Mr. Winters an' John Boyd an' Vernon Pike are guardin' him on account of they ain't got no key to keep him locked up with."

"You hear that, fellers?" Tripo bellowed. "That one-eyed, low-down murderer is right here where we kin get our hands on him. What're we waitin' for? Le's string him up pronto."

A roar of approval answered him. There was a surge toward the door.

SAM SLOAN darted aside and leaped atop a card table standing against the wall. His guns were drawn and his lips snarled back from his teeth as he crouched above the others, dominating the room. He sent two bullets through the swinging doors above the heads of those struggling to get out, and then lowered the twin muzzles of his six-guns and ordered coldly:

"Don't nobody move. I'll drill daylight through the fust one that reaches fer a gun or takes a step towards the door."

No one moved. No one reached for a gun. Most of those confronted by his guns scarcely breathed. They all knew Sam Sloan. They knew he wasn't bluffing and that the slightest movement might bring death spewing from his guns.

He straightened slowly and swung one of his guns in a short arc to carelessly cover Tripo, the rangy Texan.

"I dunno what this here's all about," Sam admitted calmly. "I know Pat Stevens brung Ezra in to jail while this here smart sheriff an' a dozen posses was lookin' for him, an' I'm gonna see he stays there till Pat decides what he's gonna do."

Without warning Sam fired his right-hand gun off at an angle from where he was seemingly looking. One of Tripo's VX riders fell back with a groan and grabbed at his shattered wrist while his half-drawn gun clattered to the floor.

"Don't no more of you try that," Sam advised them dispassionately. "I aim tuh keep this here meetin' orderly an' genteel until Pat gets back."

Every man inside the saloon tensed and looked toward the door as the sound of a wildly galloping team came up the street from the south. It stopped outside and bootheels pounded hard on the boardwalk.

Pinky Wright flung the swinging doors open and took in the situation at a glance.

"It's all right, Sam," he called loudly. "We've got Ezra right outside here an' Pat says who's got a rope for a necktie party?"

"*Pat* says that?" gasped Sam. He slowly lowered his guns while a look of utter dismay spread over his dark face.

"Come out an' see for yorselves," Pinky invited. "All of you that wanta have a hand in stringin' up the worst murderer that was ever caught red-handed in the Valley."

There was a concerted rush for the door. Sam Sloan silently holstered his guns and climbed down from the table to follow the others.

Word had passed up and down the street and already a crowd had gathered around the buckboard outside and grim-faced men were dragging Pat's unconscious prisoner from the back of it.

Pat stood up on the front seat watching the scene with his hand on the butt of his holstered .45 and a look of hopeful expectancy on his face.

He watched the tall figure of Tripo pushing forward through the others, and a shadow crossed his strong countenance as his eyes rested on the glittering badge that was rightfully his.

The sheriff pushed into the crowd surrounding the prisoner and glanced down briefly at the unconscious body. Then he leaped to the back of the buckboard and pulled his guns, shouting, "All you VX men! This is it. Fill yore hands an'. . ."

Pat Stevens shot him through the left temple. He pitched head-foremost to the ground and lay there with the bright silver badge glimmering faintly in the moonlight.

SOME of the men who had hold of the inert prisoner drew back with a shocked announcement, "This here ain't Ezra. This feller's face comes right off. Red whiskers an' all. It's a rubber mask, by golly. *It's Eustis Harlow fixed up to look like Ezra.*"

"Take him out an' hang him," grated Pat. "I ain't rightfully sheriff an' this here's one time when I'm glad I ain't. There won't nobody interfere with you while you string him up."

None of the disconcerted mob

really understood this amazing transformation of the murderer into the solid body of Eustis Harlow, but they were all so happy about it that they didn't stop to ask any questions. While they hustled him off the nearest cottonwood tree, Pat stepped down from the buckboard and leaned over Tripo.

He unpinned the badge and straightened up with it in the palm of his hand, looking at it thoughtfully.

Sam came forward from the boardwalk and suggested, "Pin it back on where it belongs, Pat. I reckon Powder Valley will be plenty glad to get you back for sheriff without no election."

Pat hesitated. He glanced down the street where the mob of angry ranchers were dragging Harlow off to hang him, and he shook his head. "Not right yet, I reckon." He smiled briefly and thrust the badge in his pocket. "Maybe I'll put it on again after it's too late for the law to step in an' stop the only lynchin' I ever saw that I plumb approved of. Come on, let's you an' me ride to the jail an' see if Ezra has come back to consciousness yet. An' then you got a date to meet yore new son."

CHAPTER XVIII

SAM WAS on the front seat of the buckboard getting the best speed he could out of the team on the way back to the shack where his new baby had been born. The horses were tired after the drive in and the round-trip out to Pinky Wright's ranch, but Sam kept them at a fast trot that carried the buckboard along swiftly.

Pat Stevens was in the back with Ezra who was still unconscious when they dragged him out of the unlocked jail and loaded him back into the buckboard. They had decided to bring him along that way because it would get him to the doctor quicker than if he waited in town for Doc Trimble to come in, and they were both beginning to be a little worried by his long coma.

They were nearing the express station and Sam was whipping the tired horses along when he heard Pat's voice speak soothingly from the back, "Take it easy, Ezra. Yo're all right now. Just rest yore head back an' don't try to sit up."

"Comin' round, is he?" Sam turned to ask gladly.

He heard a loud grunt from Ezra in response. "Where am I? What thuh hell. . ."

"Yo're in the buckboard with me an' Sam," Pat told him. "Lie still for a little. How much do you remember?"

"Plenty," Ezra growled. "You turned on me an' locked me up an' then thuh masked man got me loose. I thought 'twas you at fust, then I seen 'twas Harlow."

"Harlow got you outta jail last night?" Pat demanded.

"Shore. I thought 'twas funny at fust, then I found out why. They took me out somewheres an' tied me up with two of the VX riders guardin' me, an' then d'yuh know what Harlow done? Pat, what all did he do while he was fixed up to look like me with that rubber face that fitted over his'n? I heard 'em talkin'. He figgered on killin' people and makin' everyone think 'twas me. Thass why he got me loose from jail an' hid me out. We gotta stop him, Pat."

"Take it easy," Pat calmed him. "He's took care of all right. Everybody knows it wasn't you by now. You got loose from them, huh?"

"Yeh. Long 'bout noon I worked the ropes loose. They jumped me with knives an' tried tuh pistol-whup me. Seemed like Harlow had give orders I weren't to be kilt till he got back an' give thuh word."

"He wanted to keep you alive until he was through all his murderin'," said Pat grimly, "so's folks'd think you done it all. Then he'd killed you an' brought you in and got credit for it. It was a smart idee but you ruined it when you got away."

"There was a hell of a fight," Ezra admitted. "I got a hawse but he went lame on me near the Trowbridge place an' I stopped tuh get another. Then thuh posse got wind of where I wuz an' chased me. I knowed they'd string me up 'fore I ever had a chance tuh talk, an' I tried tuh make it to

Sam's place. Danged hawse stumbled in a prairie dawg hole an' I had tuh make it on foot. Seems like I got there awright, but I don't remember much after that. I recollect crawlin' through a winder somewheres. . ." he ended vaguely.

"That's when I hit you on the head and knocked you out," Pat explained to the confused man. "Kitty's havin' a baby and you scared her plumb out of her wits when you came in the window. You've been out cold ever since. . .an' Harlow tried one more killin' with your face on, but he got caught at it."

"How in hell did he ever fix that face to look like Ezra?" Sam demanded from the front seat. "Gave me thuh creeps there in front of the Gold Eagle when I seen him."

"IT WASN'T so hard," Pat asserted. "One of them theatrical places in Denver, I reckon. An' it didn't really look so much like Ezra when you got a good look in the light. He did all his dirty work in the mask at night, and nobody got more'n one look at him. Like I said at first, Ezra's cussed ugliness made it a lot easier. Red whiskers an' one eye blocked off was all that was really needed."

"But why'd he kill Jake Munort?" Sam insisted. "That didn't do him no good. Not after Jake had already willed his ranch to Ezra."

"Whassat?" Ezra muttered.

"That's right," Pat told him. "You own Jake's six sections now on top of the Spangler ranch. Why, I reckon Harlow didn't know about that will Jake had made," he told Sam. "Nobody knew about it till after Jake was dead. He knew Jake didn't have any kin, an' he thought Jake's ranch would go on the open market after he was dead. That's why he killed Jake. Same reason he had for killin' the others. Ethan Page had refused to borrow from him an' he had a mortgage that wasn't signed. He forged Ethan's signature soon as he was dead. And Mrs. Kincaid wouldn't borrow neither, but George was honin' to, an' he knew he'd get the Kincaid place with George's mother out of the way."

The lights of the way station shone out cheerily through the night just ahead. Sam whooped the team into a final burst of speed, and leaped from the seat as they stopped in front of the door. He hit the ground running and flung the door open to burst inside.

Pat and Ezra got out of the buckboard more slowly. Pat's shoulder was stiff and his head was beginning to ache again; and Ezra was stiff and lame all over from the knockings-around he had taken that day. They leaned on each other and limped toward the door and were met by a beaming Sam Sloan with a tiny blanket-wrapped figure cuddled in his arms.

"Looky here," he exclaimed proudly. "Jes' *look* at the little tyke, fellers. Purty as a pitcher, by golly. Sammy Ezra Sloan! How d'yuh like that, Ezra? You can be God-pappy."

Pat saw Sally's anxious face behind Sam, and he pushed past the exuberant father to throw one arm about her shoulders and draw her close.

Sally shuddered and pressed close to him without a word. She didn't ask any questions. They were all together again and she knew the horrible nightmare of fear and false accusations were ended. Pat still had one good arm to hold her with, and Sally didn't ask for more than that.

(THE END)

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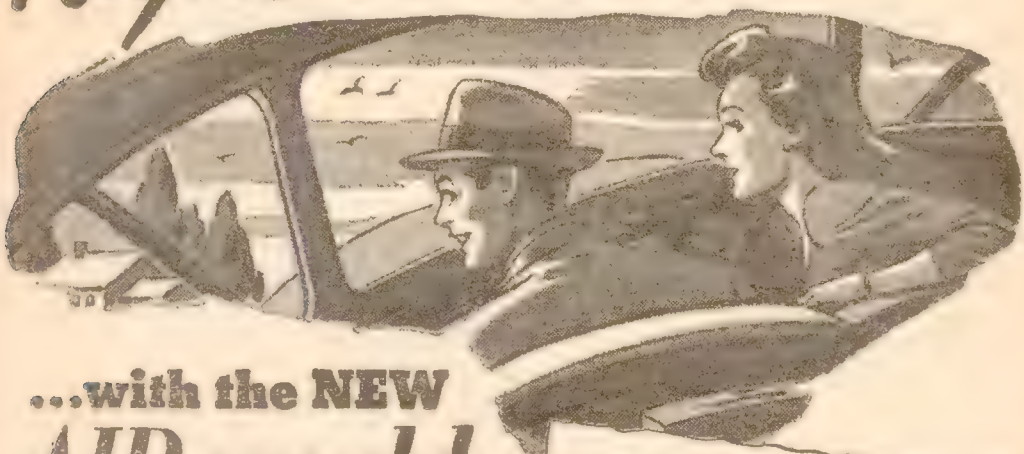

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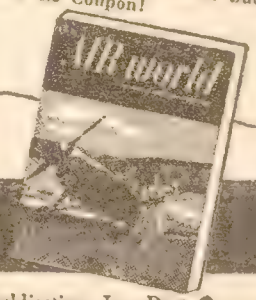

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Salt of the Earth

By ARCHIE JOSCELYN

The time to hook a sucker, as Ma Jackson always said, is when he's rarin' to bite.

THERE was nothing about the day to suggest coming ominous events. The sun shone brightly out of a cloudless sky; a soft westerly breeze ruffled the bright flower faces scattered across the fields, and bobbed at the ancient red ostrich feather which hung despondently in Ma Jackson's equally ancient Stetson.

Ma herself came with a subdued air into the house, allowing the screen door to shut with a softer bang than usual, one which hardly jarred the crockery on the shelves. She crossed the kitchen in three strides, then halted at sight of the little, precise man just now rising from a chair, looking as if he was undecided between bolting out the rear door or trying to crawl under the chair. Her broad face broke into a beaming smile.

"Well, look what the cat drug in!" she chortled, grasping the little man's hand and fairly swinging him off the floor. "The things you see when you ain't got your gun! What brings you way up here, Shoebutton, away from the wicked city? Give me one guess and I can't miss! Money!"

Shoebutton Hobbs, nursing his bruised hand, essayed a sickly smile.

"You're looking hearty, Ma," he declared. "Everything going along fine, I hope?"

"If you mean by that, am I going to be able to raise the ten thousand that's due that old bloodsucker of a Cass Richter, on the mortgage he holds ag'in the 7-Bar, you can misabuse your mind and that of your feller cohort's," Ma nodded. "It'll all be taken care of on the nailkeg!"

Shoebutton looked relieved.

"Well, since you mention it, Ma, I'm glad to hear you say that," he agreed. "With you owning a two-fifths interest in the 7-Bar, and acting as your own foreman, since the, uh—lamented passing of our former partner and friend, your late lamented—"

"You mean my Larry, of course, Lord rest his pickled soul," Ma nodded. "May he rest in peace, though if there ain't no bars for him to cross where he's at, I have my doubts." She brightened. "Since you're here, you old rannyhan, come along for a ride and I'll show you around the place."

Shoebutton shivered, remembering former rides.

"No, no, Ma, thanks," he said hastily. "But I won't have time—"

Disregarding him, Ma was already turning to the door, to bellow for Handsome to hitch up her team. But for once, something intervened which could shout even Ma Jackson down. It came without warning, and with a sound like far-away thunder, growing swiftly to a roar like that of a heavy freight train passing over a high trestle. Except that this thunder, instead of sounding from overhead, seemed to approach from deep down under the earth, as though some mighty monster, trapped in the depths, was howling in torment.

With the roar of it, and as though the monster might be twisting and breaking his bonds, came a shaking. It commenced rather gently, but increased swiftly, until the much-tried dishes danced on the shelves, and one cup jigged off and fell to the floor with a crash. It seemed to Shoebutton, on his feet, as though a mighty hand had the house in its grip and

"Don't fret, Shoebutton, 'tis only a little earthshake."

was jerking it about as he might have done to a doll house. It was with difficulty that he kept his feet.

ALMOST as abruptly as it had begun, the thunder died away in a throaty gurgle, the nervous earth was still again. Shoebutton found his voice, discovering it to be unexpectedly squeaky.

"Wh-what was that?" he gasped.

"Earthshake, I guess," Ma said, subduing her voice so that it could be heard no more than a quarter of a mile away. "Larry must of heard me!" she ended, a little awed. "That's just the way it always felt when he'd miss the keyhole and tumble across the porch!"

But the earthquake, much as it had frightened Shoebutton, had had one good effect. It diverted Ma from her notion of a ride around the ranch in her ancient buckboard, jerked along at top speed by a team of half-broken cayuses. Satisfied now that the Company had nothing to fear in regard to the mortgage payment due, Mr. Hobbs presently made his escape.

Ma watched him go, vaguely troubled by the notion that she should have insisted on him staying for supper, but with her mind on events of long ago. She had been a bride, in those days, and Larry—peace to his whiskey-soaked soul—had just carried her across the threshold of the 7-Bar. It had been at that moment that a quake had struck. Like this one, it had been a short, sharp shock, doing no particular damage.

"Wanted to jar me mem'ry, I bet," Ma muttered. "Count your many blessings, blame them over and o'er—well, Runt Hawley, as I'm a sinner! Where'd you come from, you dried-up old desert rat, you?"

For a newcomer had suddenly put in his appearance, coming from around the corner of the corrals. A wispy man with a mustache which dwarfed the rest of him and seemed almost like wings about to snatch him away from this mundane existence. He plodded behind a patient burro, with the light of countless glaring suns and silent nights on the desert in his washed-out blue eyes. But his voice boomed to almost dwarf Ma Jackson's own roar.

"Hi-ya, Ma! Supper cookin'?"

"The cook's slingin' together a mess of some sort, and if I can eat it, so can you," Ma chortled delightedly. "You and me'll have a real grab-feat this evenin', Runt, talkin' over old times. Why, I ain't disturbed me eyes by clappin' them on you for going on five years now—"

"Can't stay to talk, not this time," Runt protested. "Sure would like to, Ma, you old walrus. Be like old times, when you and Larry used to come prospectin' with me. Can't make it nohow, though. I'm in a sod-bustin' hurry. Eat and run, that's me."

"Earthquakes, and then this!" Ma surveyed him in astonishment. "The world must be comin' to a bend! First time I ever knowed you to be in a hurry, Runt."

"Well, I'll tell you how 'tis, Ma." Runt shook his head, a little apologetically. "Me, I been gettin' grub-staked, and prospectin' for gold, going to take my stake and head for Paris, first off! Have a good time!" His voice grew wistful.

"After thirty years, Ma, seems like I can't wait no longer! For I got it—my stake! Found a pocket. Here, look!"

PROUDLY, with fingers that trembled a little, he upended his poke on the kitchen table, and a stream of nuggets, mostly small, cascaded out. Almost pure gold. Ma gazed in something akin to awe.

"You sure did strike it, didn't ye, Runt?" she marveled. "I'm proud of ye, too. Always knew you'd do it, some day."

"I did, too," Runt agreed modestly. "There's five thousand in dust an' nuggets there, if there's a cent! Five thousand, and likely a few hundred to the good." He looked at her suddenly, as a new idea hit him.

"By golly, Ma!" he breathed. "You wouldn't have that much cash on hand, would you now? Save me a couple days, headin' on to sell it. I could cut right off short cross-country, if I had the cash. Two whole days!"

"You sure got it bad," Ma chuckled. "And what d'ye figger on doing when ye get to Paris—if ever? That town's a pink of iniquity, as mebby you've heard tell!"

"That's what I want," Runt agreed stoutly. "You wouldn't chance to have no such cash, would you now, Ma? After dreamin' all these years—"

"Happens I have," Ma agreed, understanding the hunger and wistfulness in the old prospector, and calculating, in her mind, that he would never get beyond the first town and second saloon which he might reach. But she was of no mind to wreck his dreams for him. "I can let ye have the cash, I guess. Five thousand. I can easy sell the gold itself to reimburse meself. But I might be cheatin' ye, if there's more than that."

"There's mebby a few hundreds extra, but that just means you won't be cheated," Runt said grandly. "And that'll be worth it to me. You always was a angel, Ma. Paris, here I come!"

* * *

MA STOOD, an hour later, to watch him out of sight, a strange little smile softening the big, broad face of hers. Runt was even goading his patient burro to a faster walk. Well, peace to him. She scooped up the gold and tucked it into an apron pocket, worn above her chaps. Half of the ten thousand dollars, painfully gathered and saved, to pay that installment on the mortgage, was gone, but the gold was worth it all, and probably more, as Runt had said. So that was no matter.

Runt was just disappearing, and she was about to turn back inside the house, when a third visitor appeared. He too, like Shoebutton Hobbs and Runt Hawley, was a little man. They seemed to run shrimp size today, Ma reflected.

This man was walking, or rather weaving, toward the house. He walked much as the late lamented Larry had been wont to do, after a trip to town. But now, all at once, the stranger lost control of his legs entirely, pitched forward, and lay unmoving.

Exclaiming under her breath, Ma started out, puffing a little with haste. Maybe the feller was drunk. But as she neared him, she revised her first guess, seeing the thin, pale, drawn face, the closed eyes. Stooping, she gathered him up in her arms almost as if he had been a child and started back for the house.

"Tenderfoot, or I'm a jackrabbit," she puffed. "Which I ain't! Look at them hands—calloused an' blistered, but never trained to do such work! And them clothes—they don't belong here. A tenderfoot, lost an' mighty nigh starved to death! You, Handsome! Come a-runnin'!"

"Comin', Ma!" An answering bellow sounded from somewhere beyond the barn, and as she reached the house, Handsome himself appeared, his long face lugubrious as a hound dog's, with gangly legs bobbing, and his glaringly yellow shirt giving him the appearance of a mud-splashed sunset rolling downhill. Shiftless, the cook, responded as well, and presently they had pried open the unconscious man's jaws and given him a few drops of whiskey, which Handsome produced at Ma's order.

The little man choked a little, then opened his eyes and strove to sit up. His eyes were meek and appealing.

"Er—pardon me. I'm afraid I must have fainted—"

"Look to me like you'd been missin' your vittles too much," Ma informed him. "Bring that beef soup, Shiftless! Here, little feller, if you can swaller, I'll feed it to you."

Which she did, spooning it down him as to a child, until a little color began to return to his face. An hour later, he was able to eat at the table, and afterward, considerably better, to tell his story, at Ma's insistence.

"I—I' M AFRAID I've made rather a mess of things—rather a fool of myself," he confessed diffidently. "I—goodness gracious, I even forgot to introduce myself. My name is Percival Bansett, and I come, originally, from Keystone, New Jersey."

"I could a guessed that much, Percy," Ma agreed. "I'm Ma Jackson. Now go on."

"I've heard of you, Mrs. Jackson,"

Percy agreed gratefully. And then, by degrees, Ma got the story out of him.

It was not at all a surprising one. Work had been exceedingly hard to find, as well as ill-paid, back east. With an invalid wife, in need of a lot of things which he could not give her, Percy had been rather desperate. And then an Aunt had left him five thousand dollars.

Instead of using this money to buy a little store, as he had often dreamed of doing, Percy had determined on a trip west, to turn the five thousand into a fortune. Always he had yearned to go west, to live great adventures. And his wife, it appeared, had complete faith in him and his ability to succeed in a big way, given the chance, now so providentially at hand.

He had arrived, as chance would have it, to pour his tale into the large and receptive ears of none other than Cass Richter, holder of the mortgage against the 7-Bar, neighbor, if one used the word loosely, to Ma Jackson.

"And the biggest crook that ever went unhung!" Ma added fervently.

"I found that out," Percy confessed. But he had told his story to Cass Richter, who had seemed very sympathetic. As chance would have it, Mr. Ritcher also knew of a perfect investment, by which means Mr. Bansett could be assured of doubling his money, probably several times over, within a space of weeks. It had seemed like providence.

"He said he had a claim, all properly filed on, as well as a legal ownership of the land," Percy explained. "He was unable to work this claim himself, however, due to some technicality of the law. At least, that was what he told me, and I believed him. But he would sell it to me for five thousand dollars, and I could dig a fortune out of the ground."

That had appealed to Percy as being highly romantic, exactly what he had always wanted to do. Unfortunately, he no longer had five thousand dollars, intact. It had shrunk, with traveling expenses and a bit left to take care of his wife, to forty-seven hundred.

But Cass Richter had been big-hearted. Professing that he wanted Mr. Bansett to see for himself and be perfectly satisfied, he had shown him the ground, as well as the title, claim papers, and so on. He had even shown Mr. Bansett where to dig, and within the space of forty-eight hours, Mr. Bansett had dug out no less than three hundred dollars in gold! The claim was unquestionably rich.

"He made me keep the three hundred," Percy went on, his voice trembling a little. "Though the claim still belonged to him. Then he allowed me to use it to pay back to him, to make up the full five thousand! I still can't believe that he was deliberately dishonest!"

BUT, once owner of this fabulously rich claim, Percy had found no more gold. Not a trace. For two months he had toiled diligently, almost starving to death. Finally, completely disillusioned, and with Cass Richter refusing to pay him back a penny of the five thousand, he had determined to return to his wife, to try and get a job again which would support her. And he had gotten in sight of the 7-Bar and fainted from hunger.

Ma listened, her jaw grim-set. The description of the claim had made her exclaim, for that was the rockiest, most worthless patch of ground on all the huge Box B, and it lay almost in the center of Richter's spread.

"The dirty, doubletossin', skunk-smellin'—" she began, then stopped, at a loss for words. Indignation and sympathy were welling up in her, especially as her guest showed her a picture of his wife, a frail, pretty little thing, and the last few pathetic, hopeful letters from her.

"She still has faith in me," he groaned. "And how I'm ever going to explain that I've not only failed, but have lost the five thousand—with which I could have bought the store, so that we'd have been really well off—"

Ma took a resolution, which had been forming in her mind as she listened. After all, wasn't the sign right? That quake, so much like Larry coming home, then Runt, then this?

"I'm going to buy that claim from you," she announced. "For what you paid for it—five thousand, cash! And then you take the money and skedaddle for home, and don't you stop till you've got that store! Here 't is," she added, and placed the money in Percy's unbelieving hands.

He half took it, then pushed it away with a trembling hand.

"But—but I couldn't, Mrs. Jackson," he protested. "I couldn't allow such generosity. You would never get your money back—"

That, Ma reflected grimly, might be only sober truth. And she was certainly sticking her neck out, taking the money which was supposed to pay that installment on the mortgage, in a few more days. She had gathered every head of stock that could be spared to raise it, already. If the payment was not forthcoming, no one knew better than she how flinty-hearted was Cass Richter. Widows and orphans, to him, were opportunities for profit, no more, no less.

But her voice was both hearty and determined as she placed the money firmly in the little man's hands, and instructed him to sign over his claim to her.

"I figger there's really gold to be dug out of that claim, like he said," she declared. "Though Cass Richter'd never tell the truth if he knew it! I'll get my money back, don't you fret none!"

"But—but suppose there is no gold ther?" Percy demurred.

"Then I'll take it out of Cass Richter's hide!" Ma promised.

* * *

THERE was a look of rain now, as though that thunder, from wherever it had come, had stirred things up. And it would be dark, later on. But night would be a good time to visit her new holdings, near the heart of Box B. Ma went alone, saying nothing to anyone. She saddled a horse for herself, though it had been a long time since she had ridden in the saddle. But a buckboard would be too easily seen, and would leave wheel tracks.

Out behind the barn, she led the horse, peered around, then stared down at the ground—where were cracks, up to two or three inches in width, some many feet long, radiating back and forth.

"Looks like that earthshake really busted things open here," she nodded absently, and climbed, like an elephant waddling up a cliff, into the saddle.

Reaching the claim, she looked about, seeing the holes which Percy had so laboriously dug, the piles of dirt remaining. She noted, too, that the quake had done a bit of showing here, as well.

"Larry," she nodded solemnly, "ye always was a drunken no-good, but I could generally depend on ye in a pinch. This time ye've done your share, and sure and I'll aim to do mine."

She found the discarded tools which Percy had left behind, and worked until it was too dark to see more. By then, it was beginning to rain, and it would be a soaker, she knew. But she was curiously content, despite her discomfort, as she rode back to the 7-Bar.

Nor was she surprised, a couple of days later, to see a chastened Runt appear again over the horizon, patient as his burro.

"I guess I made a fool of myself, Ma," he confessed. "I got to a saloon, and stopped for just one drink—oh, well, from what I hear, I don't think I'd like Paris, anyway. Now, if you could give me a grub-stake—"

"I'll do better than that," said Ma. "I've got a job of digging for you to do—for wages!"

* * *

CASS Richter heard the news three days later. One of his hands rode in to report that Ma Jackson and two of her crew were on the deserted claim, digging, and Cass, suspicion narrowing his eyes until they pinched his nose, promptly rode over to have a look and to evict them from his property. Those few rods of ground, despite the fabulous price for which he had recently sold them, were well-nigh worthless. But they were, he felt, his own again, and Cass

Richter begrudged even a spear of grass if a steer of his might profit by it.

Ma looked up, as he came in sight, and a gleam shone in her usually mild blue eyes. Then she resumed her direction of the two men who were digging.

"Well, well, what's all this?" There was a heartiness, like that in the bawl of a bull which is about to toss a picnicker over the fence, in Richter's voice. "I didn't know there were any stray elephants loose around this range—well, bless my soul, it's Ma Jackson, I do believe! Lost something, Ma—fifty or sixty pounds, for instance?"

"If I'd known this would turn out to be a hyena hunt, I'd of stayed to home," Ma murmured, sotto-voce, so that a cow in a pasture half a mile away looked up in startled surprise. "Why, hello, Cass, you old cow-thief! What brings you here, besides a vulgar curiosity?"

"I might ask you the same question," Richter snapped, his good nature already frayed thin. "What do you think you're digging for, on my land?"

"If I was diggin' on your land, I'd hope it was a grave to bury ye in," Ma snapped. "This happens to be my land, not your'n. And as to what I'm diggin' for, what would ye think? Diamonds, of course."

"When did you get to own a piece of Box B land?" Richter demanded.

"I bought it, off'n that little tenderfoot ye sold it to," Ma informed him tartly. "Paid him the same price ye charged him, too—cash! And if ye want to see the papers, I can show 'em to ye!"

Cass Richter stared, perplexed. He knew very well that Ma Jackson was both shrewd and tough, when it came to business, and this thing both amazed and bewildered him. He couldn't understand it, and he did not like things which he could not comprehend. But it seemed like a perfect opportunity for a good laugh, and he was not the man to ignore such a chance.

"Do you mean to tell me, you old walrus, that you actually paid five thousand dollars—for this?" he asked.

"And why not?" Ma demanded, ignoring the slur. "Didn't ye tell him it was worth that, and more?"

Cass Richter had his laugh. But finally he sobered.

"He was a tenderfoot," he said. "But I didn't think you were such a fool."

"So you admit to being a liar and a cheat, do ye, Cass? Not that 't is news to me—or to anyone who ever had a good look at that ugly thing ye wear in place of a face."

Richter reddened. He had laid himself wide open for that one.

"If he wanted to invest his money, why shouldn't he?" he challenged.

"Why, indeed? And if I want to invest me own money, why shouldn't I? Now get off here. I like clean-smellin' air, and we're very busy, digging."

"Digging for what?" Richter repeated.

"What should we be digging for, but the gold ye said was here? Wait, Runt, there's another nugget."

RUNT was toiling, in a hole some five feet wide by half again as deep. This hole had been started at a new spot, not where the former owner had tried digging. The ground was hard—hard and rocky, showing no sign of having been disturbed since time began, and it was a laborious job to dig at all, but the toiling prospectors looked excited. Now, puffing, Ma bent over, scraped some dirt aside, and came up with something which she rubbed against her apron. To Cass Richter's bulging eyes was revealed a genuine nugget, as big as a fair-sized marble.

"I don't believe it!" Cass gasped. "You're trying to fool me!"

"Nobody could do a better job of that than nature has already," Ma snapped, popping the nugget into her pocket. "And besides, I ain't interested in ye—only in the lack of ye! Will you get going, now?"

Cass went, but not before he had delivered one parting shot.

"Your ten thousand will be due in a few days—and I expect cash!" he snapped.

"You'll get it," Ma agreed. "I'll have that much out of this hole in a

few days. What's that make for today, Runt?"

"That's three nuggets," Runt computed. "Ought to be clost to two hundred dollars' worth!"

From a distance, Cass Richter gazed back, unhappily. As he had already proclaimed, he didn't believe it. There was no gold there. There couldn't be. Ma was trying to put one over on him. Faking finding that nugget, hoping that he'd be a big enough fool to buy this land back from her. Always trying to put something over on him, he reflected dourly, but he hadn't been born yesterday. He'd salted that ground in the first place—it had been childishly easy to fool that tenderfoot—and now Ma thought that she was clever enough to salt it and fool him, did she? Of all the crazy notions!

But, though thoroughly convinced that that was exactly what she was up to, Cass was troubled and uneasy. It had looked to him as if she had really dug that nugget out of the hard earth, from eight feet down. And Cass knew that ground. Hard, rocky. To dig a hole and plant nuggets at that depth would not be easy. It would leave signs of a lot of digging having been done. And there had been no such sign there.

At least, not that he had been able to see. Tonight he'd go back and have a better look around. If she was trying to put something over on him, she'd find he wasn't an easy man to fool. Or if, by some remote chance, there was really gold there—well, he'd find that out, too.

But when Cass returned, just at dusk, it was to discover two of Ma's crew camped there, both with guns. They ordered him to stay away, and made it plain that they meant it. Threats of intimidation or bribery were alike useless. Cass returned home, thinking deeply.

This might be just some more of the show that Ma was putting on. Keeping armed guards there, and all. But he was definitely uneasy now. If there was gold there like he had seen—the notion was acutely painful. If he had parted with a fortune, for a paltry five thousand dollars—

THE next few days did not add to his peace of mind. The mining continued, and by making inquiries in town, Cass learned definitely that Ma had brought in at least two thousand dollars' worth of nuggets, in the last few days, and sold them for their regular value per ounce. Cass had taken the precaution to file on all nearby claims, in the names of his crew members, and to post armed guards to repel all trespassers from his land. Which was all that prevented a gold rush.

He dug, or had his men do so, around the fringes, but without finding anything. Which was not surprising, for if nuggets such as those were really being found, it would probably be all in a fairly compact space, a sort of pocket. Unhappily, Cass tried new tactics.

"I don't like you traipsin' around on my land, Ma," he said. "How much will you take for that claim of yours?"

"Fifty thousand dollars," Ma said shortly. "Not a cent less."

"Do you think I'm a fool?" Cass demanded hotly.

"Bein' a lady, I'll not twist me tongue by sayin' what I think of ye," Ma retorted crushingly.

That night, Cass tried a ruse. Some of his crew, with bottles of liquid delight, managed to lure the guards away. Cass himself dug for an hour, trusting that chore to no one. Convinced, he weighed two more nuggets in his pocket and did some profound thinking. This was worth a fortune, he was convinced of that now. But he wasn't going to pay what it was worth! Yet how else should he get it?

Ma learned the answer, the next morning. With her guards still soddenly asleep, she was halted, with others, as she neared the claim.

"You're trespassing, Ma," Cass said jovially. "Crossing my land. I'm warning you, you'll have to get off and stay off!"

"But the law gives me a right to cross your land, when I have to do it to get to me own!" Ma challenged.

"Maybe it does," Cass agreed. "Maybe. But I'll keep you off and take it to court—and it will take

months before you get an order to go across my land to reach yours, I'll see to that!"

Ma retreated, angrily. She knew what that meant. In the time intervening, Cass intended to take out whatever gold there might be on that claim.

HER peace of mind was not improved by the reappearance of Shoebutton. And on the morrow, she knew, that ten thousand dollars was due to be paid Cass Richter on his mortgage.

It was due, but she had gambled, and she was unhappily aware that maybe, carried away by signs, sympathy and indignation, she might have overplayed her hand. Cass Richter was shrewd and clever, as well as unscrupulous, as his last maneuver showed.

And the money was gone. Five thousand to Runt Hawley, the other five thousand to Percy Bansett. True, she had nearly three thousand from the sale of gold, but that left her still seven thousand short.

"Ye have a way of turnin' up like coyotes around a dead cow, Shoebutton," she told him glumly. "And that's not to say that I ain't glad to see ye, of course."

"But what's all this I hear about a gold mine, Ma?" Shoebutton demanded excitedly.

Ma told him. Also the latest developments. Shoebutton looked glum in turn.

"It looks as if he has us, Ma," he declared. "Of course, we can go to court, and demand an injunction to cross his land, to reach the claim. But he will find ways to block it until he has cleaned out the claim."

"Mebby," Ma agreed, and stood up. "I'm going over there now. Want to come along?"

"But how will you get there, if he permits no trespassing?"

"I'd like to see him try and stop me!" Ma declared. "Are ye a coming, or are ye a scaredy-scat?"

Shoebutton reflected, unhappily, that he would be a fool to go. But he knew that he could not refuse. He took his seat in the buggy, beside Ma, and the cayuses were off at a run. To pull up only at the borders of Box B, where Cass Richter himself, along with four other men, awaited them. They lounged in saddles, toying with rifles.

"It's awfully nice of you to come see me, Ma, but like I said, no trespassing," Cass said, with the air of a cat which has just found the canary fatter than anticipated.

"I'm going there, Cass Richter," Ma challenged. "And do ye want to try explainin' murder to the sheriff?"

CASS hesitated, scowling. Ma was a problem, and he knew that she made no idle threats. Besides, she was a lady—at least in the eyes of the law. She could not be handled as he would do with men.

Likewise, he had had time enough now to prove, to his own satisfaction, the richness of the claim. Now might be a good time to settle it.

"Let's not get ourselves excited, Ma," he urged. "Maybe we can settle this. I'll give you a fair price for that claim."

"And what do ye call a fair price?" Ma demanded.

Cass took a deep breath.

"Well—you've already taken quite a lot of gold off it. I'll give you back the five thousand that you paid—and another five besides. What I mean is, I'll give you a receipt for the ten thousand which is due tomorrow, on the 7-Bar."

Ma laughed.

"Will ye listen, Shoebutton?" she demanded. "If 't wasn't for a crow squawkin', one'd almost think it was the birdies singin'."

"Well, what will you take?" Cass growled.

"Give me that receipt, *and* the five thousand ye cheated that poor innercent tenderfoot out of—and mebby I'll talk business," Ma agreed. "Though, if ye didn't have the deadwood on us, with land all around the place, ye'd sing out of the other side of yer louse."

Almost eagerly, Cass wrote out the receipt and paid over the five thousand in cash, and received back his own papers in exchange. Ma was

singing, off-key and not very melodiously, as they returned to the 7-Bar, but Shoebutton looked worried.

"I don't know, Ma," he said. "Maybe you got stung, at that. We might have rushed things through the courts, some way—"

"The time to hook a sucker, Shoebutton, is when he wants to swaller the bait," Ma said comfortably. "Ain't ye learned that yet?"

Shoebutton stared, astonished.

"You—do you mean to tell me," he demanded, "that you—that you salted that ground with those nuggets? But that's impossible! Soil such as that—and with a man like Cass Richter, who had salted it in the first place, and was doubly suspicious—"

"The crookeder they are, the easier they are to fool," Ma chuckled. "As to saltin' the earth—remember that earthshake? Well, I got over there, and there was a lot of cracks, two-three inches wide, six-feet eight-feet deep, right on that claim. I poked a stick down and found how deep they was, then put the gold down. I spent hours, shovelin' loose dirt from the piles the tenderfoot had dug, fillin' all them cracks, puttin' a few nuggets here an' there, and tampin' it down hard. Got every crack filled, though.

"Then it rained, and wet 'em to the bottom. Settled the dirt hard. So I filled in what they'd settled again, and after it had rained again, I started diggin'—knowin' just where to dig. But I did have some uneasy moments, I'll confess, Shoebutton. S'posin' there'd come another quake, and split them cracks deeper, and shook my nuggets clear down to Chiny? But nothin' venture, nothin' to explain."

(THE END)

RISE OF THE COWBOY

When the pioneer came to the Great Plains, he found out that he could not do as he had done on the Eastern woodland frontier. On the woodland frontier he had no use for the horse except for work; he usually traveled by boat.

Out on the plains the horse was the only means of travel. The horse being a grass eating animal, found the plains a natural home, well suited and adapted to the environment.

The horse was running wild on the plains when the pioneer arrived. Those wild herds of horses called "mustangs" were direct descendants of the Spanish horses. They were left there by the early Spanish explorer Francisco Coronado, who led an expedition through what is now our western states.

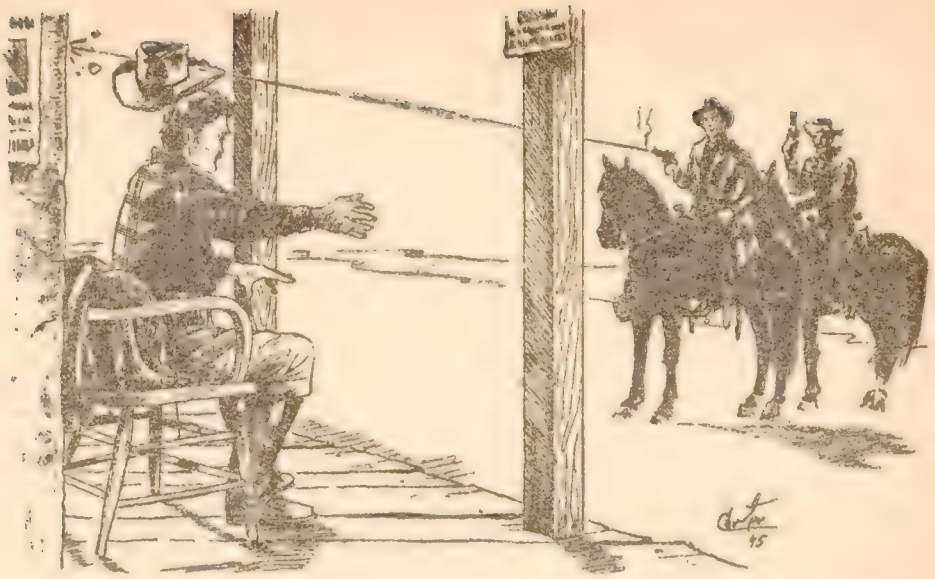
The pioneer learned to use the horse from the plains Indians, who virtually lived on horseback. They hunted buffalo and other big game on horseback; they fought on horseback. The settler on the woodland frontier had never had to deal with mounted Indians.

To learn how to use the horse, the pioneer borrowed some methods from the Indians and the Spaniards. On the woodland frontier all the horses that the settlers had ever seen were tame horses brought from England. They could be ridden with a smooth bit and a flat-seated saddle, something like the army saddle of today, or similar to the hornless saddle found in riding stables.

To handle the wild mustang of the plains the pioneer had to borrow the severe curb bit, the Mexican saddle, which gave the rider a firm seat on a bucking horse, and the Spanish spur. Most of these the pioneer designed to suit his own particular taste. They made the saddle light and more graceful, and the bit and the spur less cruel.

It was in Texas, Arizona and California that the American pioneer took over the plains horses and developed the plainsmen's method of riding them. This was the rise and the beginning of the picturesque, traditional, American cowboy.

—JAMES A. HINES



SCOURGE OF SALT CITY

By Ray Hayton

It was one right slick method these hombres used in small towns with easy-to-crack banks!

I RECKON we old timers in Salt City ain't likely to forget the day Iron Jaw McKelland and the Soda Water Kid rode into town. It was one of them lazy afternoons, when even the hound dogs are all snoozin' in the shade, and everybody is sittin' on the wooden boardwalk in front of their places, hats tipped over their eyes, snorin' away.

Well, into the midst of this tranquility comes these hombres—you might say they erupted onto the scene—cause first thing anybody knows 'bout their arrival is when the Soda Water Kid—a little skinny hombre on a big black stallion—pulls out his hogleg, and lets go with it, shootin' the hat right offen the sheriff, who is snoozin' in front of his office.

The Soda Water Kid and Iron Jaw howl with laughter as Sheriff Hoskins jumps to his feet, claws for his hogleg, and tries to get the sleep outa his eyes enough so's he can see. Finally he spots the two sittin' their hosses in the middle of the street, and advances on 'em, his gun out. The Kid has put away his gun, and they watch him approach, wipin' their grins off.

"Who done that?" Hoskins is mad as a wet hen. "Who's blastin' off pistols unlawful?"

Iron Jaw looks pained, and asks the Kid:

"You see anybody shootin'?"

"Nope," says the Kid, "ain't seen a thing."

"One of you done it," says the sheriff, "and if you don't own up and say which one, I'll throw you both in the clink."

"In that case," says Iron Jaw, "I done it. But it wuz an accident."

"He's a liar," says the Soda Water Kid, "I done it. My gun slipped while I wuz changin' it to a more comfortable position."

"I'll settle this," says the sheriff. "You both get offen them hosses, and march right into that calaboose. A night in jail will cool you both off."

Iron Jaw looks at the Kid, and sorta half reaches for his gun. The Kid grins back and shakes his head, and then climbs off his hoss.

"Let's oblige the man," he says. "After all, it's plenty hot out here."

So, peaceful as all get out, they let the sheriff take them into the jail. Seein' as how Pinto County ain't no big place, and most criminals don't live long enuf to see jail, we only got one cell. And at this time old Rance Perkins is occupyin' that cell, for reason of gettin' stinkin' drunk the night afore and shootin' off his gun in the Red Bull Saloon.

THE sheriff sticks these two jaspers in that cell, after takin' away their guns, and goes off and leaves 'em. They look around the place, see old Rance snorin' in the corner bunk, and bein' frisky like, they pour water over him and wake him up. He's still pretty drunk, and mad as all get out—but they cool him down a bit, and pretty soon he's tellin' 'em his troubles.

Seems as how he owns the local livery stable, and runs it with the help of his daughter. They only been in Salt City goin' on a month, but are happy as can be, and makin' enough to live on. They left the last place where they had a livery stable, 'cause old Rance, he got mixed up in a bank robbery. Not intentional, but accidental like.

Two jaspers were figurin' on robbin' the local bank, only on the way into town, one of 'em's hoss steps into a gopher hole, and breaks his leg, and they ride double into town. Then they spots old Rance's stable, and come in and make him furnish them with another mount, and then to be sure he don't cause no trouble 'till they get away, take him along while they bust into the bank. Then they ride off, leavin' him behind, and he has to hightail it out of town to keep from bein' lynched as one of the robbers. His daughter follows him, and they come here to Salt City and start in business again.

Everything is goin' okay, like I said, until these two bank-robbin' jaspers show up in Salt City, and are now lodgin' at his place, eatin' his grub, and makin' plans to rob another bank—this time the one in Salt City. And the old feller, he can't go to the sheriff, cause the law back in the other place, it has him on the wanted list, and the sheriff, bein' a mean old cuss, is apt to send him back. And the citizens of this other place, bein' ample peeved at him, are liable to do unpredictable things.

So old Rance is spendin' all his time drinkin', tryin' to forget his troubles, and just waitin' and shiverin' in fear for the day to come when these two bad hombres break into the Salt City bank, and get him in more trouble.

"Why don't you hightail it?" asks the Soda Water Kid. "Hunt up new stompin' grounds?"

"'Cause," moans Rance, "they made my daughter stay there with 'em, and first peep I let out, they're liable to kill her."

"The varmints!" says Iron Jaw, his big face red. "Pickin' on an old man and a girl that a-way. We oughta do somepin', Soda Water."

The Kid agrees, but can't figure out what to do—lessen it's to go gunnin' for the two bad hombres—in which case, since nobody ain't got nothin' on 'em, they're liable to wind up back in the calaboose for permanent like.

"'Course, now," says the Kid, "if we can catch them in the act of robbin' the bank . . ."

"But when they gonna do that?" asks Iron Jaw.

"Tonight," says Rance, "soon as it gets dark. That's why I'm in here. Now they can't say I got nothin' to do with it."

"A brilliant idear," says Soda Water. "What you worryin' 'bout then? You're all set."

"No I ain't," moans Rance. "I jest remembered. Since them jaspers been bunkin' with me fer a week now, folks they're gonna figure I *woulda*

been in on it, only I got put in jail, and couldn't help 'em."

IRON JAW looks at the Kid, and the Kid grins at him, and they tell the old man not to worry, that they'll fix things up.

"How?" asks Rance. "You two can't get outa this calaboose."

"Jest watch," says Iron Jaw, and the Soda Water Kid gets up offen the bunk, and peers out. The sheriff ain't around, he's gone over to the Red Bull for a drink, most likely, and it's 'bout dark now. The Kid fishes in his pocket, and comes out with a funny lookin' piece of wire, and works on the old rusty lock on the door for 'bout five minutes and bingo—it jest swings open.

They hustle the old man outa the jail, and sneak out the back door—after appropriatin' their guns from the sheriff's desk, and sneak down the back alley to the bank.

And sure enough, hidin' there in the shadows, they see a light in the bank, then there's an explosion, and a few minutes later a man comes runnin' out. Another feller, hidden back in the shadows, comes out leadin' two hosses, and this feller hands up the big bag he has in his hand, and starts to swing aboard.

That's when Iron Jaw steps out and yells "Halt" and gets a slug through his hat fer his troubles. The Soda Water Kid rips off a shot, and the mounted one sags in the saddle. The other quits tryin' to get into the saddle, and drops to the ground, clawin' for his hogleg. Iron Jaw steps over and raps him one across the head, and he goes out cold.

A few seconds later the sheriff, who was on his way back to the calaboose, comes runnin' up, and near goes blind with rage when he sees his three prisoners ramblin' 'round so free like. But when Rance tells him how the two saved the money in the Salt City Bank, why the sheriff, he figures as how he can overlook a little thing like a jail break.

So they send one of the jaspers to boothill, and locks up the other, and the sheriff says seein' as how he had a bit of money in that bank, he'll overlook any wanted notices he gets for Rance. Then they adjourn to the Red Bull Saloon, and have a few drinks, and Rance, he asks the two jaspers to come home and meet his daughter.

But they refuse—and amid a rousin' hurrah from the citizens of Salt City, whom they have saved ample wampum, they ride off. Like I said, we old timers here ain't likely to forget the day them two hombres rode into town. In a few short hours, I guess they caused more excitement than we seen in years.

THERE is one other thing I find out from a line tramp what drifts into the Red Bull Saloon one day—but I didn't pass it on, and I got that line tramp outa town afore he had a chance to talk to anyone else.

He said that he heerd tales further west of a coupla fellers who been workin' a slick deal—so slick as a matter of fact they never was caught at it—and their secret got out only after they give up their trade and retired.

Seems as how these two hombres would pick a town with a rich little bank, and then ride into this town, do somethin' that would get 'em thrown in the calaboose overnight; then, durin' the night, one of 'em, who had once been a locksmith, would unlock the door of the calaboose, and they'd slip out, rob the bank, hide the loot, and slip back into jail. Then, when they got out the next mornin', free of all suspicion, they'd pick up the loot and hightail it.

Now, I ain't sayin' these two slick-playin' robbers is Iron Jaw and the Soda Water Kid—but I gotta hunch that iffen the sheriff hadn't happened on the scene prompt like, maybe that money wouldn't a been saved—but only changed hands. And I'm powerful glad them two didn't stick around to meet old Rance's daughter—'cause they'd been ample peeved when they found out what kinda girl it wuz they passed up all that wampum for . . .

THE END

SONS OF GUNMEN

By CLIFF CAMPBELL

A trigger reputation can play hell with a man who wants to go straight

CHAPTER I

HE DIDN'T look like Trigger John Bland, his dad. For one thing, he was a couple of inches taller—and slimmer, too—than his late, stocky-set father. And young Luke Bland had a shock of yellow hair where Trigger John had been darker and thinning back from the forehead. Yet he had hardly stepped out of the bleak, rain-drizzling night into the musty little Split River hotel when he was recognized. Maybe it was the stiff-legged walk like Trigger John's. Or perhaps that way he paused for a split second on the threshold to cut the gray-flecked eyes around, one brow cocked. Trigger John always did that, too, on entering a strange place. And then there were the hands, just like his father's, big and long-fingered on stems of heavy-boned wrists, the hands of a born trigger-slammer.

The fat, middle-aged man in the doorway of the connecting bar mapped him and came across the scuffed carpet of the hotel lobby. "For spitting in a crick, dollars to pesos you're Trigger Bland's button! Ain't you?"

There was no denying it then. That name, Trigger Bland, was magic. The owner behind the desk, who'd been sneering at the trail-stained kid, split his face in a gasp of awe. And the lounger, who had

been fussing at the pot-bellied Congress stove over against the wall behind Luke Bland, spun sharply so his spur clicked against the stove leg. At the metallic snap, there was a flat *whack-ck* sound. It was Luke Bland's hand slapping for the thonged-down holster on his leg as he whipped around. He might as well have written his name in letters a foot high with that gesture. It was a legend in the Southwest how Trigger John used to slap on the draw like that.

In a matter of moments, a knot of men were bunched around Luke Bland. He was killer-bred, the son of a fabulously swift gun-slinger, a top-hand with the trigger. One gent was crowing to the others how Luke was the spitting shadow of his pop with that holster action of his. Their open adulation was flattering. Only Luke, with the strangely calm face for one so young, didn't like it. If they'd admired him because he was the son of a man as honest as the day was long, a man who'd worked hard and bucked bad luck in his later days without a whimper, who'd never turned down a busted friend—well, then it would have been different.

The fat man from the bar pulled at a gray-streaked mustache and winked. "Well, son, what're you doing over in these parts? Ain't the fancy climate, I reckon. . . . Now you wouldn't be looking for to cut Blackie Enrow's sign, would you?"

There it was. Blackie Enrow, another great master gunner, and the man who had blasted down his dad, Trigger John. He heard himself saying, "I don't know—yet. . . . I came to see." His voice was toneless.

ANOTHER spoke up eagerly. "Mebbe you won't have far to look, Bland. Enrow, they say, has been seen around Big Horn right recent." Big Horn was the next town up the Lincoln Trail. They were like slaver-jawed coyotes, waiting to see him, Luke, tangle with his father's killer.

Wrath churned inside Luke Bland and he wanted to spit at them. The rains-hot night was split by a shout with a gun report close atop it. Through the window a man could be seen splashing through the puddles of the road, triggering skyward as he came. The running man bawled:

"Billy Spade's busted outa the jailhouse! Spade . . ."

Men came piling into the street, pulling on coats and strapping on gunbelts. Luke Bland was forgotten as they piled out onto the hotel porch, everybody oblivious to the rain now. Spade was one of the worst badmen ever to come out of the Panhandle, a killer to the core, a truculent, swaggering brute. Wanted in three states. He had been picked up in a hill cabin, in a drunken stupor and crippled by a leg wound. He had been held in the Split River jail awaiting deputies from the county seat. Luke knew who Spade was.

The hotel owner hobbled by him on his crutch. "Grab yourself any room you hanker, Bland!"

"Bland" seemed to come across the hotel lobby like a whispered echo. A figure was in the barroom doorway, thumbs hooked in a brass-studded gunbelt. That told Bland who the man was. Enrow!

Trigger John, his father, had told him about that gunbelt and scabbards of Enrow's. Enrow had always been very superstitious about them, believing they were lucky. Once he had risked his very hide, riding smack back into a pueblo spilling over with badge-packers, to retrieve them when they had been lost. They were Blackie Enrow's holsters all right.

Something buzzed inside young Bland like a fuse waiting to go off. This was it. The fingers of his half-hooked hands tingled with little electric pulsations. His eyes ran up the tall, willowy body, to the swarthy, handsome face dominated by the hawkish nose. He knew it well from that old reward handbill his dad used to keep in his desk. Then he blinked. The man in the doorway was too young to be a contemporary of his father's, his face too unlined and boyish.

It came to Luke Bland as the other advanced a few slow, wary steps. This must be Blackie Enrow's son, the image of his father.

"Reckon you're looking for me, Bland—that is, if you're John Bland's

son," drawled Jim Enrow. His voice was hoarse with the effort of keeping down tension-bred emotion.

"John Bland's son," said Luke with a slight nod. He was watching young Enrow's hands, and he realized Enrow's dark eyes were locked on his. "Only it's your pop, Blackie, I guess I want to see . . ."

Jim Enrow's face went stony. "My father died four days ago from the gunshot wounds put in him by your pop! That slick-eared coward—"

"Shut up!" Luke Bland's hands splayed suddenly in preparation for the draw. His skin was too tight for his face; he needed air.

Jim Enrow's lips peeled back. He was slaunchways, in the gunman's stance. "I was coming down the trail to find you, Bland. . . . When you're ready—fill yore hand! If you got the nerve. . . ."

The sands of time were running out for one of them. Hands edged downward, poised. And then the lamp standing on the hotel counter guttered, hissed faintly, and then went out for lack of coal oil.

Jim Enrow realized he was framed in the doorway of the lighted barroom and flung back inside the latter, scuttling around the corner of the bar counter itself. Figuring Enrow might snipe him from the cover, Bland jumped behind a big chair with the stuffing falling out of it.

The front door was slapped open again and a group of grim, worried-faced citizens, headed by the fat, gray-mustached gent, marched in. . . .

THE hotel proprietor got a candle lighted to replace the burnt-out lamp. Morose, they fumed around indecisively. Somebody said they *had* to take out after the Rio Kid, Spade. "With what—a handful of broke-down, spavined old coots like us?" growled the fat man, Maples the undertaker.

The man next to Luke Bland said Maples was right. He told Luke about it. Two of Billy Spade's saddle pards had appeared at the jail with a hostage. She was Judy Luce, the jailor's own daughter. The jailor had had little choice. They had knocked him unconscious, freed Spade, and ridden off with the girl still as hostage.

"Why don't you hit the trail after them?" asked Luke. Across the lobby he could see Enrow with his hooded eyes never leaving him. In the excitement, Enrow had gone unrecognized.

Because, the man told Luke, the town marshal had taken every able-bodied young man with him that morning when he hit out after a rustler bunch. There was fresh commotion outside as a rider splashed up. He was brought in. He was a hoeman from the north road. He had been out hunting a lost cow when he saw Spade and his companions head into Reilly's Gulch. A girl had been with them still. He stopped and the stillness was grim.

Maples moved on Luke Bland. "Bland, if they had a young, tough jigger to lead 'em—somebody like you, mebbe—there's nine-ten men who'd take the trail. If you—" He let it hang there as all eyes locked on Bland.

Bland slapped on his flat-crowned, wet Stetson. "All right. I'll go." He didn't know why he said it. But he had a feeling of escape.

When they stood on the hotel porch with Maples announcing it to the throng, Jim Enrow eased over close to Bland. Blackie Enrow's son looked down off his shoulder at Bland with sneering eyes. Then he tapped Maples.

"Reckon, mister, I can lend a gun, too," he told Maples.

THE nine townsmen got saddled up and they rode out westward, hoofs thudding hollowly on the puncheons of the river bridge. The rain had petered out with a gusty, bone-chilling wind rising in its wake. Over in the southwest a yellow gondola of moon drifted across the saw-toothed hills. In its glow, occasionally cutting their eyes at each other suspiciously, Luke Bland and Jim Enrow sloped along at the head of the column.

Inside of half an hour they were swinging into the mouth of Reilly's Gulch, a cut running northward with ragged walls of reddish stone, high

and sharp. The tracks of the fugitives were clear-cut on the wet sand patches of the gulch floor. Stub Cutter said the gulch ran for almost twenty miles without a break before it reached the broken hill country to the north. No chance of a rider quitting it unless he wanted to waste a couple of precious hours and half-kill his horse. Cutter was a sawed-off jasper with a slight limp, a one-time deputy to the marshal. He had a trick of speaking with blunt authority from force of habit.

At a stiff hand lope, they went up the gulch. Luke Bland eased his guns in the leathers. He saw Enrow watching the move furtively.

"I ain't the breed to pull a sneak shot on you, Enrow!"

"So you tell it, Bland! But I know your tribe, by grab."

Bland was about to snarl back something to rawhide him. But he kept himself in leash, his mind going back to his mission on the Lincoln Trail. He had come to learn how his dad had gotten his chips cashed. Rumors had drifted back that somebody, perhaps a pard of Enrow's, had called to Trigger John Bland an instant before Enrow marched in, causing Trigger John to half turn. It had been fatal. Now, Luke was down there to find out if it had been that way. He had not suspected that Blackie Enrow, too, had died as a result of the duel.

"Easy, everybody!" snapped Cutter authoritatively. "The gulch narrows up here. Good spot for an ambush."

THEY pressed on faster. The moon was brighter now against the blue carpet of the sky. They came to a rock spring, where tracks there showed them one of the outlaw ponies had gone lame. The posse got excited. Why sure, they'd have them any moment now.

"That Rio Kid is slicker'n slobbers, a heap smart," Luke warned them, then blinked at the echo of his words. It was Jim Enrow saying the same thing.

When the broad opening of the gulch onto the flat wastelands was sighted ahead, spurs were thrown to the sweat-caked ponies. Out there on the barrens, broken by little save scrub growth, Billy Spade couldn't stay out of view long. They piled pell mell for the end of Reilly's Gulch. Luke Bland didn't, cutting instead toward the pile of shale droppings from one of the side walls. Dropping from the kak and leading his cayuse, he scrambled up it. There were steps behind him. It was Enrow, dogging his footsteps, a Colts barrel spiking from his hand.

"Pretty slick, Bland! Figured you'd take a powder and slip off afore I'd settled with you, you damn dog! I'll—"

CHAPTER II

THE first resounding crack of a Winchester roared over the gulch. One of the posse ponies screamed like a hurt human thing, then crashed onto its forelegs and settled. The rider took a header into the brush. Twice more the Winchester bit through the thudding hoofbeats. One man swayed in the hull with a bullet rip in his shoulder. And another, Tolly Barr, clerk in the General Store, was lifted clear of the saddle with a shot in the chest.

Luke Bland had located the drygulching outlaw by the flame flash of that third shot, though. The man was up atop the other wall of the gulch where it slanted off toward the badlands, firing from behind a screen of sage. Luke's right Colts snorted into life before the hombre could lever a fresh shell into the Winchester and drop another man. Luke sent lead burning across the gulch and into that sagebrush up there. The range was too great for real accuracy with a short-gun, though. The Winchester crackled again and a corner of the rock Luke used as a parapet flew free. The next shot nicked his sombrero brim. There was no help from the rest of the posse on the gulch floor. They were in a panic, slamming triggers blindly.

Then fresh gunfire lashed out from further over on the heap of shale. It was tall Jim Enrow cracking down on the ambusher. The lead burning at

him from two angles was too much for the latter. He leaped up and hustled back from the gulch lip. Left Colts steadied atop the boulder, Luke drew careful bead and triggered. The retreating man's rifle flew up into the moonlight and he stumbled once. But he made it to a pony ground-anchored in the shadow of a pine; a moment later his waning hoofbeats drifted back.

Down in the bottom of the gulch, all was confusion. The gent with the bullet gash in his shoulder was whining that he had to get to a sawbones right off and wanted to be taken back to Split River. They had Tolly Barr propped against a hummock and were trying to work some whisky down his throat. But he was a goner; that Winchester slug had hit him where he lived, dead center in the chest and going clean through him.

Shortly, his wan face screwed into a tired smile. A froth bubbled to his lips, crimson against the pallor of his skin. And then he was gone. Hats were lifted off; one man made the sign of the cross. After that, they wrapped him in a blanket and put him in a shallow grave to be picked up on the return trip. Luke and Jim Enrow bandaged up the wounded man's shoulder. When they rode out of the gulch, they were a fuming, vengeance-hungry pack.

"Busting outa jail is what you expect an outlaw to do if he can," Stub Cutter put it. "A coyote runs when it slips a trap. But killing Barr was murder. We won't bother taking Spade back in when we catch him." He meant they'd sling a rope over the handiest cottonwood bough.

THE tracks of the fugitives—three now, Spade and one of his men and the girl—bent northwestward across the low rises of the wasteland. There was no sight of them under the scimitar of moon. Time had been lost back there in the head of the gulch. A little later, as they came out of a little hollow by a fallen-in soddy, Cutter shouted. He claimed he'd sighted a rider ahead as the man vanished behind a stretch of mesquite jungle.

The posse reached the mesquite strip, veering wide lest they bumble into another trap. But there was none. Beyond the gray stretch of mesquite a faint cart track waved across the browned grass of the badlands to a cluster of paintless buildings crouched at a crossing. When the bunch halted a hundred yards off from them, the tiny settlement seemed as dead as a cemetery. Shutters closed, no lights. A loose board creaked in the bleak wind.

"Might be a nest of Billy Spade's friends in there," Cutter said as they hesitated.

"And Spade might be slipping free on the other side," Enrow drawled scornfully. "You gotta go in to find out." Luke found himself nodding.

Cutter bridled, out to boss the show. "We aim to catch Spade—not grab ourselves a ticket to Boot! But if *your* britches are so hot, nobody's stopping ya!"

Enrow's answer was to drop to the ground, hitch at his tight-fitting gray pants, and walk toward the settlement. Luke Bland slid from the saddle after a moment. "I'll drift along just to cover his rear." He went after the now-vanished Enrow, not quite understanding himself.

When he next saw him, Jim Enrow was moving through the shadows of the single, weed-flanked street, a bared gun against his leg. There was an insolent swagger about him. Luke caught himself admiring the cold nerve of the rannyhan he should hate. Then Enrow whipped across the road, flipped his cold quirly stub out into the moonlight and faded inside a door.

Luke went after him. He came abreast of the ramshackle one-story place Enrow had entered. Across the sun-bleached front, "Last Chance" was daubed in faded letters. Luke crept in to glue an eye to a crack in the shutter of a front window.

DOWN on the end of the bar inside the place, a stub of candle flickered. Behind the counter lolled the boss, a mountain of flesh in jeans and a greasy undershirt. On a box against the wall in the rear sat a sec-

ond man. Enrow was down near the rear too, midway across the long room and facing the pair. Every time the candle flame waned, shadows ran out from the corners like lapping tongues.

"Don't get playful, fat man, with that cut-down ten-gauge you got under the bar there," Enrow was saying quite casually. "And I'd powerful like for you to tell me if Billy Spade passed this way."

The proprietor sleeved his splayed nose slowly. "Billy Spade? Who's he?" He shoved forward a bottle and a glass. "Have some gila spit?"

It was then that Luke Bland saw something shifting that wasn't shadow, in the corner to Enrow's right and a little behind him. Enrow cursed in a bored tone, kicked a chair out of his path, and walked toward the fat boss with his gun barrel wagging like an admonishing finger. Then Luke had the door open and jumped inside. The figure materialized from the unseen doorway in the right rear corner, candlelight silvering the gun barrels pushed before him.

Enrow whipped around toward Luke Bland. Saw him apparently slinking up behind him. "You damn back-stabbing rat! By Gawd—"

Ribbons of powder flame ran out from Luke's gun muzzles. The thunder of the reports battered the eardrums in the confines of the narrow room. A split second later there was a third report from the rear. It was the bullet of the pelican coming out of the corner. It dug into the rough flooring and he himself spilled over the spot with a bullet scar over the ribs and a chunk of lead in his left leg. Enrow whirled back around and savvied what had almost happened to him. One of Luke's hoglegs bucked on the recoil beneath his scowling, dogged face. The lead rocketed by slim Enrow to gouge a splinter off the bar surface. The fat boss dropped the shotgun with a clatter.

Enrow had his weapons, cocked now, covering the boss and the gent who'd leaped from the box. "Jehosophat, you're sudden with the hardware, Bland," he blurted instinctively.

THE rest of the posse came slamming in. Stub Cutter took one truculent look at the wounded man, propped in a chair now, and recognized him. He was Luby, a two-bit trail tough who roamed about the Badlands. The ex-law officer struck off Luby's sombrero with a sweep of a braided quirt and waggled it under his nose as if for a second blow.

"All right, Luby. Spit it out or we'll bleed it outa you! Billy Spade's been here, ain't he?"

Luby nodded as he gripped his pants-leg above the blood stain. "Sure, he was here. Cin I help it if I'm stoppin' off at the same time?" But another brandish of Cutter's quirt and more information came. Luby had sold him a fresh pony and Spade and his man, with the girl, had ridden off to the south down the trail that ran that way. "That's all I know. . . . But I never figured you'd be after Spade," he added with a nod at Jim Enrow. "Blackie, your dad, and Spade were friends nine-ten years back. Gimme a drink, somebody!"

The possemen stared at young Enrow. They hadn't really noticed him before this. "The son of Blackie Enrow . . . the man who killed Trigger John Bland," one of them said in a hushed voice as his eyes slid to Luke.

For a moment they forgot the manhunt, their eyes licking anticipantly. There had to be a showdown between these two sons of gunmen, their faces said. Gunsmoke and bloodshed in a bitter-end duel.

"Awright, awright," Cutter sang out. "He's headed south, trying to double back on us. Let's hit the saddle leather, gents. No time for settling personal scores now, you two! . . . I knew we'd learn something here if things was just handled right," he added pompously as they swung into the saddles outside.

Luke Bland's gray-flecked eyes slitted as he stared at the back of Stub Cutter's neck in the moonlight. Cutter was getting under his hide. Luke's pony sidled nervously so that he saw Enrow a few yards away.

From the way Enrow, too, measured the ex-deputy, it was plain his feelings were the same.

THREE and a half miles outside the settlement they came to the yellowish waters of Buttermilk Creek in the thinning night. It was a sluggish, shallow thing, no more than knee-deep in the middle, straying across the drabness of the Badlands. And the mud flat of the far bank was uncut by any fresh hoofprints. Cutter's men swarmed up and downstream a few hundred yards without finding any sign of a crossing. Yet at the edge of the trail on the near bank was the stub of one of those brown paper cigarets it was known Billy Spade smoked. He had come that way beyond any doubt.

"He'll probably stick with the crick for miles—riding in the water," Cutter handed down the dictum. "He'll be heading that way for the hills." He pointed upstream off to the northwest where the low, ragged hills of the broken country shoved up against the fading stars.

"No. He'll have gone downstream," Enrow stated flatly. "Spade ain't the one to go into a hole like a gopher. He craves the lights and honky tonks of a wide-open town too much. Always has. He'll be heading that way for Segaro or mebbe Horsehead." He pointed downstream.

"He's a slick ear. He'd never do what was expected, like hunting the brush," put in Luke Bland, agreeing with Enrow. But his voice was lost in the general uproar of argument. Luke was remembering how his dad had always said that when you were after a slick lobo to gamble on him doing the unexpected. Spade the Rio Kid was as slick as they came.

Flinging up a hand, Cutter bawled for silence. "I say he's headed for the hills. I'm pushing upstream. Them that're coming with me . . ." He sidled his sorrel off a few yards, tacitly calling on them to pick sides.

They did. Almost as one, the men from Split River swung over behind Cutter. "Well," he said with satisfaction, "it looks like the majority says we—"

(Continued On Page 92)

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FAMOUS

WESTERN

(Continued From Page 91)

"I'm still going downstream—'cause I'm plumb certain Spade did too." Enrow spat over into the brown buffalo grass, picked up the rein.

That was a shock to them. One man said, "Stubborn as Balaam's mule, huh. . . . Well, Bland'll be coming with—" And then they saw that Luke Bland sat his pony on the same side of the road as Jim Enrow. They hadn't expected that.

Luke was some surprised himself. It wasn't that he was siding with Enrow. Luke was danged certain, too, Spade had hit downstream because he would be expected to go the other way. Cutter's jaw unhinged. He hadn't expected to lose both the young men from the posse. But Cutter couldn't back water then. He snorted, waved to the Split River men, and turned his sorrel upstream.

Luke Bland and Jim Enrow were left alone at the crossing. Their eyes met and both hombres felt embarrassed, sheepish. It was strange to be paired off, each felt, with the man he was supposed to hate. . . .

CHAPTER III

ENROW'S dark eyes flickered. "Mebbe you ain't such a lunkhead, stringing along with me, Bland. . . . Yeah. With no witnesses now, if you git a chance for a shot in the back—"

Bland's face blackened with a scowl. Both men's hands were drooping for gun butts. "A polecat recognizes his own stink, Enrow! Somebody called to my pop and his back was turned when your pop—"

There was a gunshot from up in the direction the Split River posse had gone. A few seconds afterward, the two of them saw a stray cull go galloping up over a rise from some trees fringing a bend of the stream. And Cutter's irritated swearing at the trigger-locoed gent drifted back on the wind. It reminded them both of their mission.

"We give our word to ride down this Billy Spade, Enrow."

"Well—that's right. Him and his men'll be downstream somewheres. They'll never expect—"

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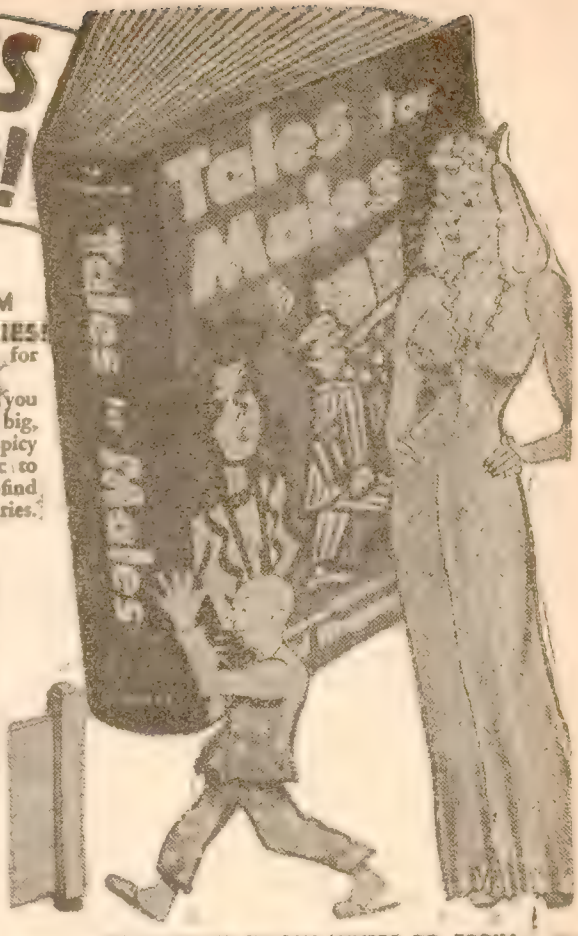

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The cooler, straighter-thinking Luke picked it up. "Enrow, they're lobos, slick and wire-tough. It'll take more than one of us alone."

Jim Enrow nodded slowly. "That's right. . . . Yes, we gotta git Spade first. Later—"

Luke spiked a finger at him. "That's it. We settle our score *after* we've hung the deadwood on Spade. Until then—you swear you'll side me like a regular pard?"

Enrow even smiled thinly then. "I swear."

"You got my word on the same," said Luke, swinging his cayuse downstream. A sigh of relief came through his teeth as they sloped off through the graying dawn as the tide of night ebbed.

The stream began to deepen after it was joined by a feeder creek running out of a small draw. They left the badlands behind them for a more-heavily timbered country. Sometimes the water ran between sharp cutbanks that forced them to swing their ponies into the increasing current. Off in the distance, a coyote howled wearily as if bidding goodnight to the waning blackness. Over a spiny ridge to the east a saffron band presaging the dawn broadened. Enrow's horse stumbled in a small pot-hole and they drew up by unspoken assent. Both their ponies were jaded from the night's riding.

They agreed on a couple of hours' shuteye, especially for the sake of the ponies. If one of them gave out, they'd lose all chance of giving Spade a catching. Luke mentioned the danger of a Spade gunhand snooping around. There was that ambusher he had left at the end of Reilly's Gulch. "I'll take the first watch," he offered. "Never need much shuteye anyway."

"Neither did I," snapped back Enrow. "We'll flip a coin." Luke called as he spun it and won. He chose the first watch.

ENROW bedded down in a thicket back from the bank. Seated against a tree trunk, with the mist steaming from the earth as day came like an uncertain interloper, Luke

had time for plenty of thinking. He recalled what his pop had told him about the famed Blackie Enrow. How Blackie had been a heller, running wet ponies out of Old Mexico and indulging in some rustling. He had been in a number of gun ruckuses with notches on his gun butts to testify to them.

"I'll hand Blackie one thing," Trigger John Bland had admitted. "Badman or no, in all of them killings, it was face to face with the other man getting a square shake, by grab."

Blackie Enrow had been picked up with the notorious Eberfield Bunch, been sentenced to a term in States prison. He had served his time and when he emerged had announced he was hanging up his shooting irons forever. Trigger John said there were two occasions when he and Blackie had almost tangled. John Bland himself had been a one-time deputy, had worked as a rustler-hunter for the Cattlemen's Protective, and later had hired himself out to clean up bad towns. He too had finally eschewed the gunfighter's role.

One of the occasions had been when a tip came in there was going to be an attempt to bust open the bank in the next town down the river. Trigger John had been pitched by a bad horse and suffered a busted collarbone. So he hadn't been with the badge-packers who laid a trap for the bank raiders. Blackie Enrow was one of the few who rode out of that trap alive. The other time was when he sloped into a salty pueblo where Enrow was due to arrive in a matter of hours. The whole town had been thumping it up for them to face each other with hands filled. But a plague of the pox had broken out and the place was quarantined. Enrow had not come in, naturally.

"And I'm danged happy we never did tangle," Trigger John had concluded. "Blackie was plain pizen . . ."

"But they did tangle—finally," Luke said grimly.

"You aiming to let me sleep half the day away?" Jim Enrow called truculently from the thicket. He came striding through the grass with his boots in his hand. Luke left the creek bank to sleep himself.

(Continued On Page 96)

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WHEN he woke on a sultry morning with a leaden sky reducing the sun to a pale, pestiferous stain above, they choked down a cold breakfast. A wily cuss like Spade wouldn't fail to catch a plume of campfire smoke. They hit the saddle leather once again and pushed on down the stream. They pushed hard but were slowed because they had to keep an eye peeled on the banks for horse sign. Spade could have left the creek at some point.

"Wonder why that Luby gave up the information on Spade so easy?" Enrow mused once. "Spade's got a nasty rep for looking up a gent who turns on him, my pop said. He—" And he broke off. The mention of his father made him remember he should hate Luke Bland. Cold, harsh antipathy reared up between them like a tangible thing afresh.

Either Spade was driving on at a horse-killing pace, if he hoped to keep travelling any distance—or he had quit the creek course, Luke had about decided at high noon. And the latter seemed more logical. Then he saw one of those brown paper quirlies on a boulder in a little back water where it had landed as it was flipped away. It was a short distance from there that Buttermilk Creek narrowed to pour into a rock-sided pass.

It dropped on over a short rapids to angle along in a small gorge, deepening till in spots the laboring ponies were chest deep. When the low but sheer walls closed in the water boiled and churned in a torrent. It was rugged going.

"The Snake-in-the-Hole country," Enrow told curtly as he steadied his stumbling pony.

It was plain why it was so named. The creek was like a broken-backed snake, bending and doubling and hooking and winding down there in the seam sunken in the rock. Sometimes there was a narrow strip of shale or stone ledge at one side. At other times the sheer walls ran straight down to the water, forcing them to enter it to keep travelling. The creek bed was rocky and pitted with holes. Both of them took duck-

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(Continued From Page 96)

ings when their ponies fell, Luke going in twice. And it was airless in the gorge too, without a breath of wind stirring. The sun refracted from the walls. Even a few minutes after they were wetted they were bleeding salty sweat again.

The afternoon was wearing away with a gray haze rising in the gorge when they halted for a breather. Enrow daubed with a bandanna at a gash in the back of his hand where he'd struck a rock in falling. Luke Bland was just thinking what one hell of a swell series of spots for ambush the gorge afforded. Enrow mentioned off-handedly:

"Big Moon Gates'll probably be with Spade. Moon's like a shadow to Spade. And a bad pelican when it comes to gun-play, too. He—" He broke off as he saw Luke eying him peculiarly.

"Right plumb familiar with Spade's bunch, ain't you?"

"Meaning?" Enrow's fingernails rattled over the brass studs of his father's shell belt.

"Not sure yet. . . . Only that Luby said your pop and Billy Spade were old friends."

"Don't get scared—spit out the rest of it, Bland!"

The lines bracketing the ends of Bland's mouth went white. "You wouldn't be a pard of Spade's, would you? You wouldn't be leading me into a trap, to turn me over to your friend, Billy Spade, huh?"

JIM ENROW spat out one ugly curse word. Then he picked up the reins and headed on downstream. "Nobody's stopping you from turning back, mister," he called over his shoulder. He twisted around sharply in the kak as he realized he had left his back exposed. Luke Bland was calmly pinching out his smoke—and pushing on after him. Luke's hand was just a half inch from the bone-handled gun of his dad's stuck in his waistband beneath his shirt. Enrow couldn't know that.

The atmosphere was frigid and crackling with tension between them as their horses splashed ahead. Their blood thundered in their pulses.

Young Enrow muttered something about how certain gents had a habit of getting suspicious when their nerve began to run out. Luke's teeth clicked together. Something had to break.

Then Enrow dropped, "'Like father, like son . . .'" It was just as they swung into a crooked elbow of the creek course, both in the water.

"My pop never ran with coyote killers!" Luke flamed, hand slapping down for the right holster. His pony slipped on a stone beneath the surface and he never completed the gun-grabbing motion as he struggled with the reins to keep the animal up.

The slim Enrow had swung his pony wide toward the other bank for fighting room, long fingers curled above one of the inherited brass-studded scabbards. "And my pop never worked for damn bounty money shooting other human critters outa saddles!"

It was going to come then. Like a tenuous string of wire tautened to the snapping point, it had to.

Some sixth sense made Jim Enrow's eyes twist to the right, further downstream. He was on the outside of the creek bend, had a view not open to Luke Bland on the inside. Enrow's mouth jerked as if he would shout. The spanging smash of a rifle exploded in the gorge and a ricocheting slug screamed off the wall just over Enrow's head. . . .

CHAPTER IV

FLINGING out of the saddle over the horse's neck, he landed in the water some six feet ahead, then dragged the horse back around the bend into cover. He came up spitting water. "Billy Spade's camped out down the stream. . . . In a cave on the bank."

Luke was already down from his saddle and they stood shoulder to shoulder, their bitter enmity of a few moments before forgotten. Cautiously, hunched, they edged their heads around the screen of an overhanging tree growing from a crevice in the gorge wall. Downstream

(Continued On Page 100)

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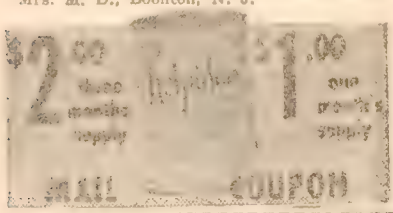

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MONEY BACK GUARANTEE

(Continued From Page 99)

around a bend, a shaggy-headed man crouched in the mouth of a cave on a rock shelf a couple of feet above water level. He was on one knee, squinting into the haze, gripping a still-smoking Winchester.

Behind him, two other men stood with drawn Colts, one of them puffing on a stogie. "Moon Gates—that's him smoking," whispered young Enrow. A fourth man appeared from the cave. Luke asked if that was Billy Spade. Jim Enrow shook his head grimly. They both jerked back as the wind fluttered the foliage overhanging the water. Their eyes met. They had the answer now to why Luby had so easily parted with the information about Billy Spade. Spade had picked up two more gunslingers back in the Badlands settlement. Up in the hills or in this gorge, he would be a tough proposition for any posse with four pair of guns backing his own.

"Spade's squat and broad as a barn door . . . got red hair, too, that grows almost down to his eyebrows," muttered Enrow. And they risked another look around the bend. "He must be back inside the cave. And the girl . . ."

The man with the rifle was squatted just inside the dimness of the cave now, half hidden by a clump of green growing at the edge of the mouth. Moon Gates was right close to him, too. They could tell that by the puffs of cigar smoke drifting out. The cave was about a hundred feet from the bend where the two gunmen's sons were.

"We could prob'ly get the rifleman with a good shot. But—" Enrow didn't need to say the rest. That shot would only serve as a warning. Then, too, there was always that girl they held as a hostage. They had to be hit like a thunderbolt, jumped by surprise.

Simultaneously the two twisted their eyes up to the top of the gorge. But there was no way of getting up there without returning up the creek to where it entered the cut miles back. Enrow said they'd have a chance if they only could cut in at

(Continued On Page 102)

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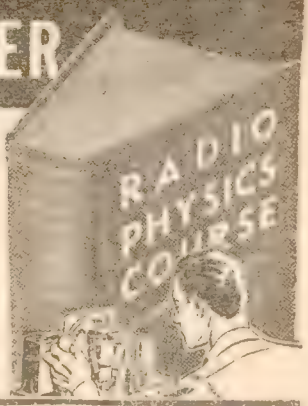

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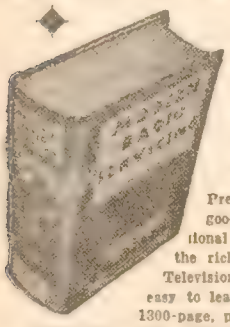

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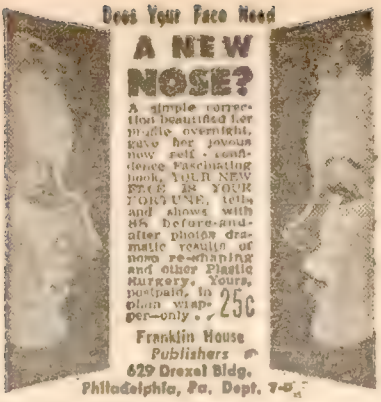
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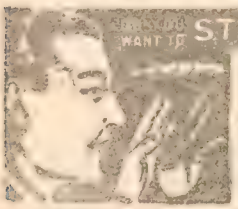

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(Continued From Page 100)

the cave from opposite directions. But that was impossible, too. Luke remained silent, thinking.

"Mebbe you were just dreaming, George," a wind-carried voice said. "If it was a posse, they'd be a-bawling to us to surrender. And we would—like hell!"

"It was one man, Moon," the rifleman's voice carried to Luke and Jim Enrow. "I saw him plain as day. . . . A slim, dark fella, Moon."

"There's one way, Enrow," Luke whispered. "Does that Moon Gates know you?"

ENROW tipped his head slightly. Once while with his late father they had met up with Gates. "Why?"

"You're the image of your pop—so he oughta remember you. . . . That one way is for you to go in there." Enrow looked at him as if he were locoed. "I don't mean smoke your way in," Luke went on to explain. "You go in there as a friend—and a fugitive."

"Fugitive? From what?"

"Me. . . . Look. We fire some shots back here outa sight of them. Like we were having a gunfight. Then you go wading around the turn and down to them."

"I was having a gunfight with whom?"

"With me, the son of the man who—" Their eyes slid away from each other for a moment. *"Sabe?* You wounded me but I high-tailed it up the creek. And your horse has been killed; you walk in on 'em as a friend."

"Then?"

"Then I slip down the bank and try to jump 'em. . . ."

Enrow sucked his breath. "I heard of easier ways of getting a window in your skull. You'll have as much chance as—"

"It'll be your job to keep their attention there. If I fail—well, your hide'll be as good as nailed to the fence, too. Gents like Spade play rough when they smell an attempt to trick 'em."

"All right. It's the only way, I reckon."

(Continued On Page 104)

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(Continued From Page 102)

"They'll probably make you shed your hardware. You got a hideout cutter stached on you, Enrow?"

Suspicion licked up in Enrow's eyes. Then he shook his head. Luke hesitated. After a moment, he unbuttoned his shirt and produced the ivory-butted .45.

"Here. Stick it somewhere out of sight—but handy. It—" His voice broke. He was giving his father's gun to the son of the man who had put out his light. He watched Enrow work it into a pocket. Luke licked his lips and Jim Enrow did the same thing. "All set?"

"Y-yes. Good luck, Bland."

"Same to you, Enrow."

THEY measured stares for a long second, lips open as if to speak. Then both glanced away. Instinctively both had wanted to shake hands. Luke Bland backed to the bank at his rear till the water swirled around his boot tops, worked upstream a little. He nodded. Enrow gave a sign. And their guns were blasting into action as they both emptied holsters with deadly swiftness.

For one brief moment, Luke wanted to laugh crazily. It was crazy. Here were he and Blackie Enrow's son swapping lead—and being extremely careful to miss each other. Cannily, young Enrow swung backward as he triggered so that those in the cave mouth below the bend could sight him.

Luke sent a slug that geysered water over Enrow. Another chopped off a piece of foliage just above the latter. Enrow was a good actor. He paused in his triggering, turning his head as if to watch the progress of an enemy. Then a roar of rage busted from him.

"You won't git away, you coyote! You won't git—" And he switched to slam a couple of bullets upstream as if at a fleeing gent. He let his weapons slump as if the fugitive had made it out of gun range, cursing bitterly. "And you drilled my horse too, you dirty tinhorn! By Gawd—"

Enrow turned in the stream and went through the pantomime of sight-

ing the cave. He waded around the bend out of sight.

Enrow was hailed as Luke Bland got back to the bend and stole a look. Enrow answered the figures in the cave mouth below.

"Holy hell—Moon Gates!" he called. "Danged if it ain't! I'm Blackie Enrow's button, Moon. Remember me?"

Luke saw the rifleman and Gates, stogie stub still in his disk of puffy face, ease out onto the ledge. They kept the wading Enrow covered though Gates said howdy to him. They wanted to know what had happened. Jim Enrow gave them the yarn of a gun duel with the son of the "polecat" who had fatally wounded his father. "And I put lead in him before he pulled stakes but he plugged my cayuse," he finished.

The pair on the shelf put their heads together. "Did you happen to cut the sign of a posse around, Enrow?" Gates demanded.

"Sure," said Enrow, advancing unconcernedly in the creek, the picture of a jasper expecting a friendly welcome. "Back there in the Badlands last night when I was chasing that young Bland. The posse hit on up north into the hills! They after you gents?"

A THIRD and fourth man appeared behind Moon Gates. They were wary, hand on gun butts. When Enrow clambered onto a sandbar, he was told to toss his hoglegs ahead onto the shelf. When he did, one asked, "You got a hideout rig on you, ranny?"

Enrow sleeved his dripping face. "You gents afraid of the derringer I got in my back pocket? Or ain't you got shells in your cutters?" Moon Gates laughed at that and bent to help Enrow up onto the shelf. A bottle was passed him and he tilted it for a slug. And upstream, hugging the sparse growth along the rib of earth at the left side of the creek, Luke Bland rounded the bend and worked down toward the cave. He was praying under his breath.

"Well, I reckon I'll be outlawed now for plugging that lowdown peli-

(Continued On Page 106)

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(Continued From Page 105)

can, by grab!" He started to lift the bottle again. "Hey, is that old Billy Spade in there? And that filly—"

Hunched beneath a piece of overhanging rock, Luke saw a block of red-headed man appear. He shook hands heartily with Jim Enrow. Luke heard him say, "I liked to put lead into Blackie when he up and quit the owlhoot. We fought like hell. But bygones is bygones. You're sure the spitten image of your pop, boy. Like seeing a ghost!"

One of the men was peering upstream through the haze. It was thickening as the sun, out of sight from the gorge now, westered. Luke had sunk up to his chin in the water. The gent seemed to be looking right at him. A loose piece of stone rattled down the other wall of the gorge and the man's gaze shifted there.

"Say, don't tell me you gone and gotten hitched, Spade?" Jim Enrow whacked him on the back. Enrow acted half orey-eyed. "I saw the skirt back in the cave there."

Spade guffawed. This was a relief from the suspense of wondering whether or not the Split River posse had happened on their trail. He felt they were in the clear now. He wouldn't have to sweat about making time with the girl who had taken sick on them.

"Me hitched? You got a sense uh humor just like your pop, Jim! Me, I ain't aiming ever to get halter-broke. Have another drink?"

Luke Bland was in closer. He saw the nervy Enrow maneuver so he was between two of them and the cave. A ribbon of feathery mist floated before Luke so he couldn't see them for a moment. It cleared. And the rifleman, on one knee, was looking right along his barrel at Luke Bland. There was the whiplash crack of the gun. Luke saw that at the last instant Enrow seemed to lurch so that he brushed the man's shoulder, throwing off his aim. And then Luke was blinking and spitting against them the shower of powdered stone the rifle slug had blasted from the wall close to his head.

(Continued On Page 108)

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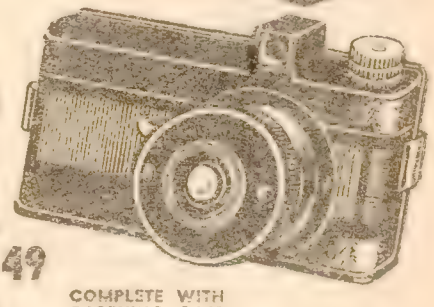

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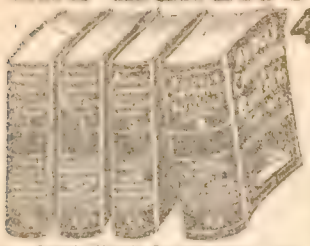

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(Continued From Page 106)

HE RODE the trigger of his right gun twice. The rifleman toppled sideward from his kneeling position like an upset statue, the Winchester sliding over the shelf into the creek. Gates was shooting, simply whamming a storm of lead at Luke Bland. The latter had to hold his fire as he plunged forward, ducking behind boulders. For up there on the shelf, Enrow had dug out his hidden Colts. But one of them had grabbed his arm before he could get it up. The gun went off. And Enrow was tangled with that man and the roaring cursing Spade. Luke couldn't shoot without the risk of hitting Enrow in the threshing turmoil on the shelf.

A second one of them was lashing lead at Luke too But a pennon of haze drifted over the creek surface, masking him for a moment. One of the struggling trio was slammed against Moon Gates, knocking him off the ledge. He landed standing in the water. Ripping his hogleg free, Enrow bounced it off another's forehead so he slumped. Then Enrow had scrambled back into the cave itself. Luke Bland's cutters coughed a smother of lead.

The tall bony pelican to one side of the cave mouth broke in half and followed his falling weapon into Buttermilk Creek. Moon Gates' bullet slapped water in front of Luke. The spray closed his eyes as he let the current carry him rapidly downstream a litle past the shelf. Moon over by the shelf screeched as Luke's lead found his flesh. But Spade's wire-tough lieutenant wasn't finished.

The gorge boomed and seemed to rock to the crash of the gun reports. Enrow was throwing lead from the back of the cave. One of the three left was crouched to one side at the entrance and hammering bullets into the cave. At the upstream edge of the shelf, Spade's red hair showed behind a patch of foliage at the upstream end of the shelf, his guns winking red to match his head.

Something grappled with Luke out in midstream. It doubled around his waist and rocked him backward off balance as he tried to get Moon. He

struggled but couldn't get his guns down level. Looking down through gunpowder smoke he saw it was the corpse of the bony pelican he had blasted off the shelf. An eddy had swung it out against him.

Luke got free. At the same instant, a hammerlike blow struck him in the left shoulder, stunning him a moment. Hot fire raked down through the wounded flesh. The gun in his left hand was useless because he couldn't lift it. Moon Gates waded toward him to finish him. Luke's right gun and Moon's smokepole frothed together. And then Moon flung up his hands to grab at his puffy face where lead had knifed open his cheek and torn off the top half of his ear. He thought he was brained. His gun went under water and he tottered back against the shelf.

MIST enveloped Luke Bland again. The firing had broken off. When the mist cleared, he saw that the gent firing into the cave was down flat on his back. And Enrow was poised in the cave mouth. Luke sent the last slug in his right-hand gun into the clump of green hiding Billy Spade. And the reckless Enrow leaped as Spade switched to meet Luke's threatened attack. Enrow's gun, the one belonging to Trigger John Bland, was empty. But he brought the barrel down over Spade's red-thatched skull with a hollow thud.

The job was done.

Enrow reared up from his knees and blinked around as if he couldn't quite believe it. Out in the water, the scowl of intense concentration faded from Luke's face and he splashed some of the creek over the reddening shoulder of his shirt.

"Holy sweet Pete," Jim Enrow said huskily. A moment later he reemerged from the cave leading young bedraggled Judy Luce, the jailor's girl. Riding in the rain last night, she had taken cold and was delirious with fever. But she was alive. . . .

CHAPTER V

IN THE waning glow of the sunset, they rode on downstream to where the gorge ended some six miles further on. The ponies of the

(Continued On Page 110)

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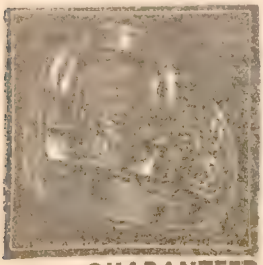

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(Continued From Page 109)

bunch had been tethered on a little strand just around from the cave. Billy Spade was lashed in the saddle like a sack, moaning at times, but still out from that blow by Enrow. Naked from the waist up, Moon Gates rode with his painful but not serious head wounds staunched by the shirt wrapped around his head. He kept slugging redeye and wondering when in blazes they'd get to a sawbones.

A couple of hours after dark, with the scimitar of moon the duplicate of last night's, they came down an alkali trail to a store and a few houses at a crossroads. The storekeeper and his buxom wife quickly took over the care of the sick, shaking girl. The few inhabitants clustered around the two prisoners. Spade, propped in a chair with hands lashed, was conscious again. But he didn't know where he was or what had happened.

As a horse doc finished strapping up the flesh wound in Luke Bland's shoulder, a rider left for the nearest town on the Lincoln Trail to get a John Law. There was a commotion as Spade, somewhat out of his head, jumped up and wobbled toward the front doors. A couple of men seized him and forced him down on a barrel head. Spade sat muttering.

"Trigger John Bland almost nabbed Spade once," one of the townsmen mentioned. "They say it was Blackie Enrow who warned Spade so he got away."

Luke looked up to meet Jim Enrow's stare. The eyes of both went cold. They were remembering how each had happened to come to Split River. Enrow's gaze switched to Luke's bandage-lumped shoulder questioningly.

"My right side ain't hurt," Luke said stiffly.

No more words between them were necessary. There was a side door. They moved toward it. Moon Gates looked up with a fresh cigar he puffed on. He was taking the thing philosophically, a man whose business was gunslinging and knew that this day had to come. He thumbed up toward Spade.

"Danged shame. You know, Billy was quitting. He was headed for a

little place he'd bought over in Arizona where nobody knew him. Then he had to run smack-dab inta an old enemy who gave him that leg wound. . . .Seems like once you git a rep for a hot trigger finger there's no escape—ever. . . ."

That was settling into Luke Bland as they stepped out into the cool freshness of the night. His dad, Trigger John, had had a rep as a crack trigger-slammer. Had tried to hang up his guns. But Fate wouldn't let it stay that way. He had crossed Blackie Enrow's trail and. . . .

THEY moved down the road in the clear, yellow moonlight to the edge of the settlement. A sun-baked flat stretched off at either side of the trail and Jim Enrow, breathing hard, stepped off the edge of the latter. He spoke quickly, a little harshly, the words tumbling out.

"Bland, afore we go cutting at each other, I wanta say you're one slick gunslinger. Wouldn't uh wanted a better man siding me."

"Same goes here," got out Luke uncomfortably.

"If—shucks, if your pop hadn't taken advantage of mine—well, I'd say forget it and—"

"I heard it the other way around."

"Blackie, my pop, had gone blind in one eye. Your pop knew that and—"

"Like hell he did! Somebody yelled at Trigger John from behind as your pop walked in, way I heard it. Nobody could uh beaten Trigger John at straight shooting or—"

Back at the store, the front door opened and a voice carried clearly on the night's stillness. "Its' the old story. . . .Once a gunman—there's no turning back."

Enrow and Luke were glaring at each other. But some of the venom faded from the mutual glare. "All right," said Enrow, slapping down his gun butts. "Ten paces and—"

"We turn and fire," Luke finished for him.

They both turned and for a moment the backs of their shoulders touched. They paced away from each other, each striding slowly and precisely. Neither of them thought of the other

(Continued On Page 112)

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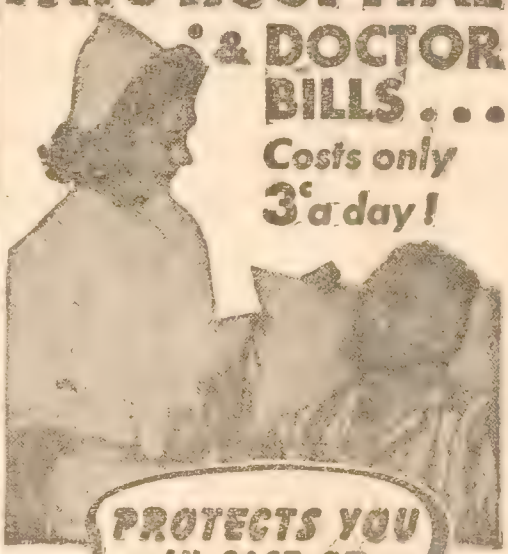

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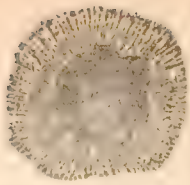

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(Continued From Page 111)

getting him in the back now. Luke felt the sweat rivering down the sides of his face, caught Enrow's faint cough. There was no fear in Luke Bland. He was Trigger John's son, had been taught to sling a hogleg by him. But after he got young Enrow, he would be branded one of the new tophand gunslingers and. . . .Jim Enrow swallowed drily. In a few moments, they would be hailing him as a fit offspring of the great Blackie Enrow.

"Nine," he counted the paces under his breath.

HOOFBEATS drummed on the night from the south. Both men swung that way in time to see a bunch of riders swinging up the trail where it bent around a hill. In the van was the man from the settlement who had ridden out to get a John Law. Beside him rode a man with a law star shimmering on his vest. It was Evans, the marshal from Split River, with his posse. Returning from the rustler hunt, they had hit out in this direction on the chance Billy Spade might try to come down through the Snake-in-the-Hole gorge.

"That's them! Them's the two that brought in Spade," cried the rider from the crossroads settlement.

Luke Bland pulled his hand away from over his holster guiltily. On the other side of the trail, Enrow quickly crossed his arms on his chest and edged back toward the road. Evans and his men pulled up between the pair.

"Say, that's sure great about grabbing Billy Spade! Sure is—" He broke off as his eyes swivelled between the two. "Something familiar about you two spalpeens. You now—I'd swear you—" He was eying Luke.

There it was again. They'd find out he was Trigger John's son. Then that Jim was Blackie Enrow's boy. And certain things would be expected.

Bland managed a grin, shaking his head. "Don't reckon you know me, marshal. Just came inta these parts. My handle's Stevens, Sandy Stevens."

There was the suspicion of a wink as Enrow cut his eye at Luke. Then Enrow said to the marshal, "And my name is Smith. Bob Smith. . . ."

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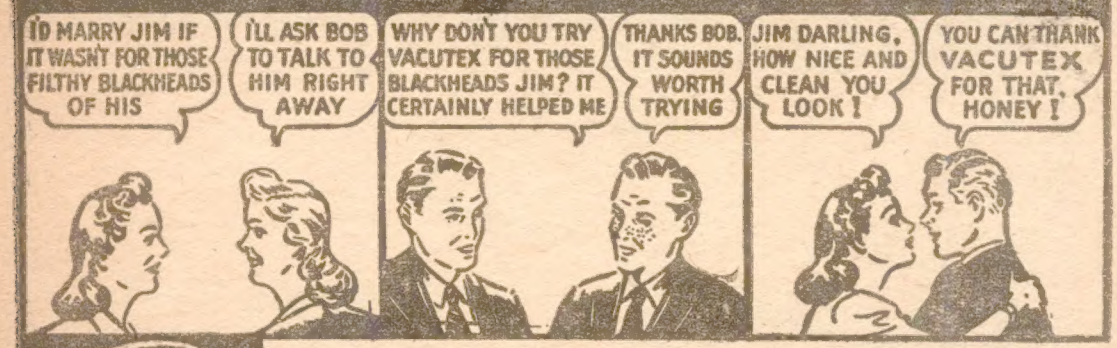
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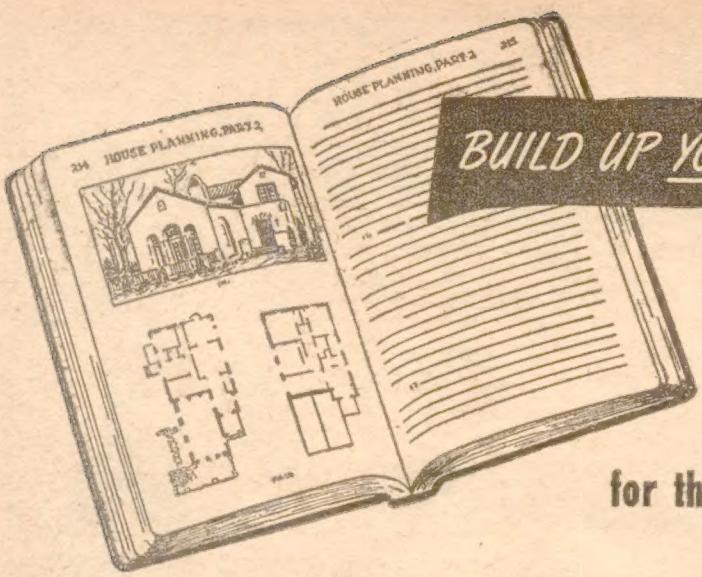

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